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KEI SAZANE

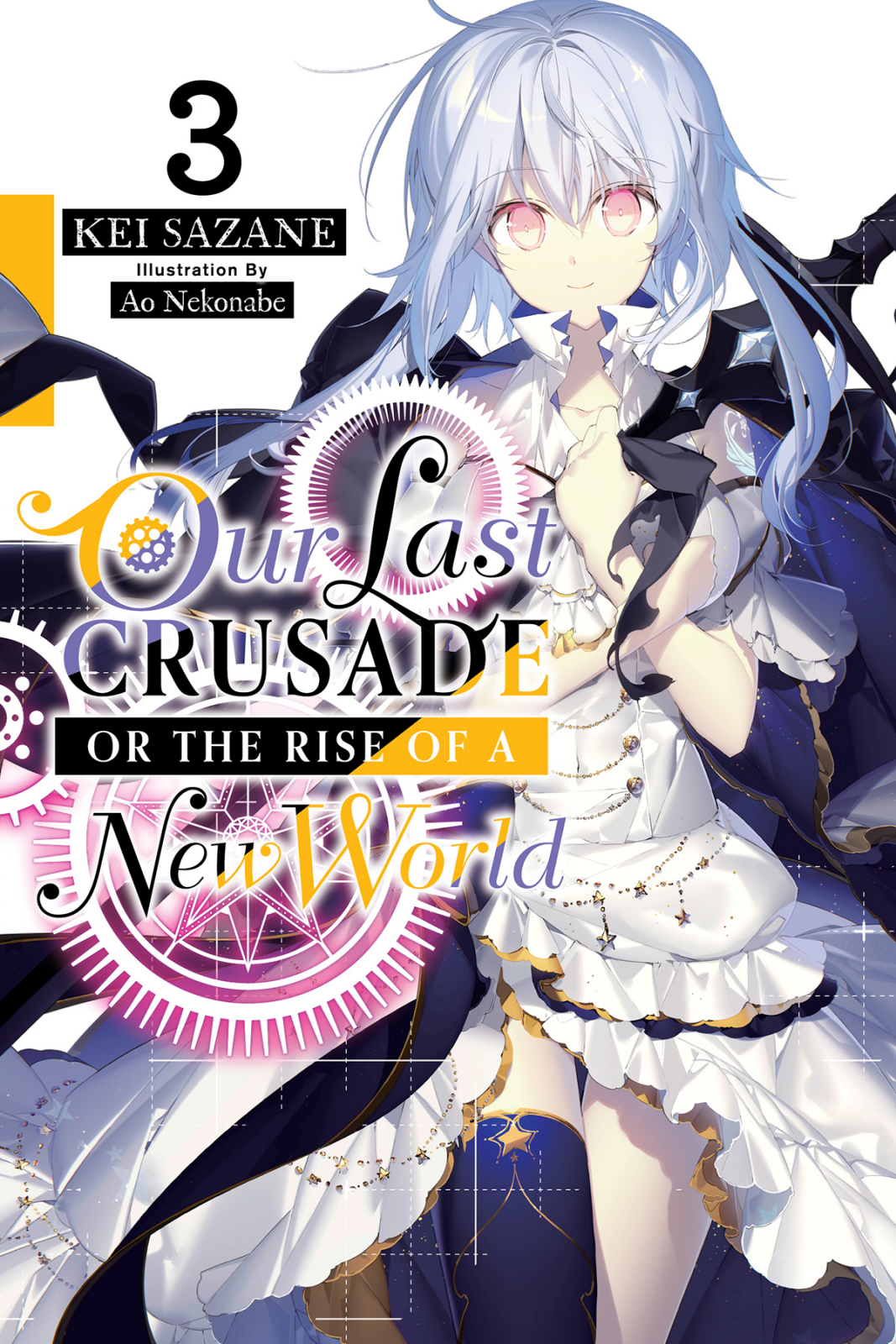
Illustration By

Ao Nekonabe

Our Last
CRUSADE

OR THE RISE OF A

New World



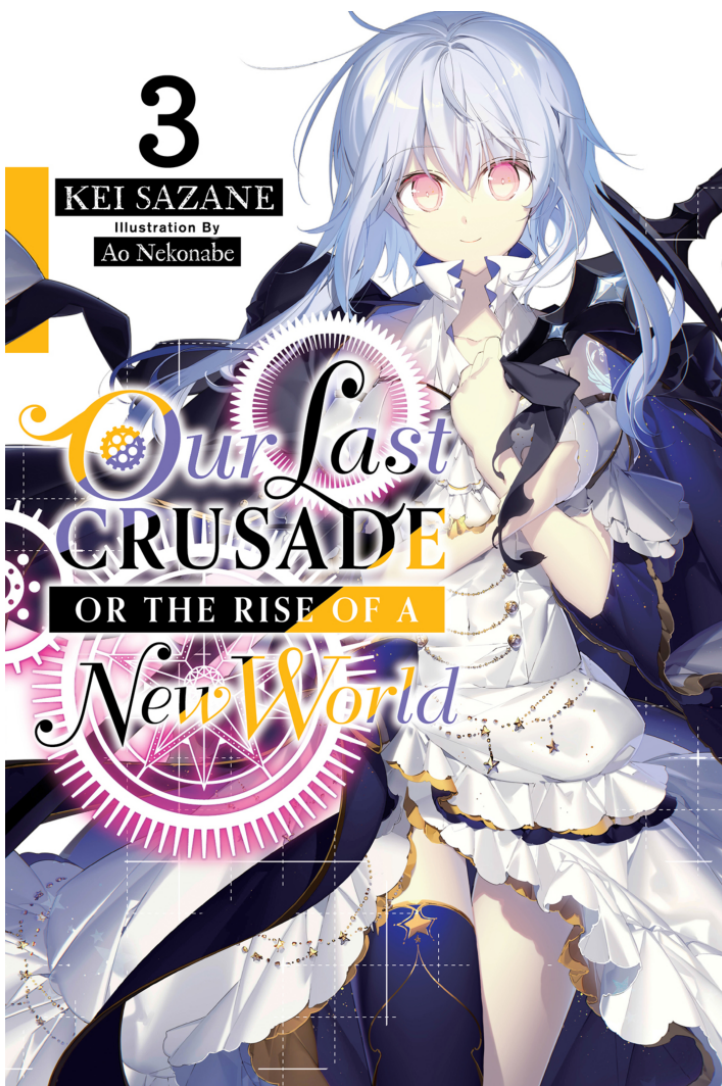


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Mismis Klass

The Imperial commander of Iska's unit, who plunges into a vortex and becomes a witch.

ASTRAL SWORDS

The twin swords that Iska received from his master. The black steel sword can slice through astral power, and the last attack it intercepts can be reproduced once by its white counterpart.

ASTRAL CREST

A pattern appearing on those infected with astral power. It is the mark of a witch or sorcerer—making one a target of persecution in the Empire and giving one passage of entry into the Sovereignty.



Our Last **CRUSADE** *New World* OR THE RISE OF A

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Our Last
CRUSADE
OR THE RISE OF A
New World

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Illustration by
Ao Nekonabe


NEW YORK

Copyright

Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World 3

KEI SAZANE

Translation by Jan Cash

Cover art by Ao Nekonabe

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HAJIMARU SEISEN Vol. 3

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Yen Newsletter

So fert Sew lu sis ria Es.

What am I to you?

lu ez clar ria xel, lu ez karel eia xel pha bie Ec les sanc.

Let me hear your answer. Seek it with your inner voice.

E ema evoia fert Ez lihit, xel cia miel bie shel.

*You will become what you wish. And I will become the one who supports
you.*

PROLOGUE



Alice's Apprehension

"Lady Alice, that's your fourteenth sigh of the day."

"...Yes, you're right... *Sigh*..."

"Make that fifteen."

"I just can't get myself out of this slump. Hey, Rin, is this what you would call a heavy heart?"

In the Star Spire, Alice sat on a bench in the garden, looking up at the sky, surrounded by fragrant flowers spotted with dew.

Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX was one of the princesses of the Paradise of Witches, or the Nebulis Sovereignty—making her a girl who possessed mighty astral power. Her sun-drenched golden hair was dazzling, and her ruby eyes were filled with pride. Though she was still seventeen, her body had bloomed early, boasting mature curves and charming features that granted her a beauty fit for a princess.

Except Alice kept letting out gloomy sighs, which was putting a damper on everything else.

"Lady Alice, what's gotten into you recently?" asked her attendant, perched on the bench next to her.

The serving girl with light-brown hair parted down the middle and tied back on both sides was Rin Vispose. She was a year younger than Alice. In her housekeeping clothes, she looked simple in appearance. However, hidden on her person were daggers, needles, garrotes, and more concealed weapons of all kinds.

Rin acted as Alice's aide—and guard.

"Is there something the matter with your body?"

"I'm in perfect shape."

"Are you feeling peckish?"

"Hey, I just had lunch. With *you*."

"Then what's the matter? Lady Alice, I am here to lend an ear."

Rin placed her hand to her chest as she spoke, grasping at straws.

“As your attendant, it is my duty to understand your state of mind. Please don’t hold anything back! I, Rin Vispose, will listen to every last one of your worries!”

“My chest feels tight.”

“What?”

“My undergarments are too small now. Seems I’ve outgrown this pair, too... Shame.”

“Are you *trying* to brag?!” Rin yanked her hand away from her flat chest, face flushed. “Uh-huh. I see. Fine! My chest is as flat as the horizon! I can’t *possibly* relate to you, Lady Alice, as someone who’s perfectly fine in children’s sizes!”

“Just kidding. Ha-ha, you’re so adorable, Rin.” Alice sat upright.

It was as though Alice could regain lost energy whenever she saw Rin fume or become flustered—though she did feel just a tad guilty about it. Rin was blushing hard, but she was absolutely full of life.

Alice found that unbearably cute.

The fact that Rin was incredibly composed most of the time only made Alice adore this childish side of her even more.

...Plus...I feel like Rin would get mad at me again if I said what’s really on my mind.

If Rin found out her current mood had nothing to do with the Nebulis Sovereignty but rather a certain soldier from an enemy nation, she was sure to flash Alice a disapproving look.

...I wonder if Iska is safe.

...I think he’s alive, but there’s no real way to know.

Alice’s woes had started nearly a week prior.

After the battle in the canyon between the Empire and the Nebulis Sovereignty, Alice lost sight of her rival, the Imperial swordsman Iska—the vortex had blasted them away when astral energy surged out from the planet’s core.

“This power. The astral spirit is close..... Oh no! I don’t think I can control it!”

“Alice?!”

Iska was a former Saint Disciple, bound to Alice by fate, and the one who she couldn’t defeat in a full-blown battle. Alice had been impatiently waiting for what seemed to be an eternity, hoping they

would finally settle things...

Except their battle of destiny had been postponed yet again.

Alice felt this invoked the same level of disappointment as if her long-awaited wedding had been canceled due to an unforeseen storm.

...Oh. Though it may be blowing it out of proportion to compare it to a wedding.

...I mean, we're enemies on the battlefield. Even if it's just a figure of speech, that example might be...

Right as Alice's fantasies were starting to run wild, Rin peeked at her face. "Lady Alice?"

"I-I'm not thinking about weddings! Iska and I are—"

"Iska?"

".....Uh-oh."

Oh, geez. Just when she'd attempted to talk her way out of it, she let his name slip. While Alice smiled painfully at her own blunder, her attendant's face clouded over.

"LADY ALICE?!"

"Wait, Rin! It's not what you think! Listen to me! Please!"

"No! There's no mistaking it! How many times are you going to make me say it? That soldier is an enemy! And a low-ranking one at that. A *princess* of our country should pay no mind to him. A mere Imperial soldier is—" Rin scowled as though she had suddenly remembered something. "Well...I will acknowledge his skill as a swordsman. I also suffered defeat at his hands once. I do understand why you might concern yourself with him, Lady Alice."

"Right? *Right*?"

"...Why do you look so happy? We're talking about the enemy here." Her attendant let out a long sigh. "I understand. If you're going to keep getting so worked up about that swordsman, then I would rather let you do what you want, Lady Alice."

"Do what?"

"What I mean is, let you go through with your wish to settle things—just between the two of you."

"Wait... Seriously?" Alice couldn't believe what she was hearing. After all, this was coming from a girl who had been against her contacting Iska this entire time.

"B-but I wonder how I should go about it..."

"All you can do is patiently wait until you meet again. That boy has made past appearances in the neutral city of Ain. If you've

bumped into him three times there, I think paying that city a visit will increase your chances of finding him.”

“...But my schedule at the royal palace is incredibly packed.”

“I’ll adjust it. Three days during your next time off. And I will make arrangements so you may leave the palace, Lady Alice.”

“Oh, Rin! Thank you!” She leaped up from her seat and pulled the attendant to her chest. “I shouldn’t have underestimated you as my attendant!”

“P-please! Lady Alice?! ...Y-you’re squeezing me too hard. Please don’t crush me in your huge chest!”

“O-oh my. I’m sorry.” She quickly released the attendant, who was beginning to turn pale.

“...*Ahem*. But in exchange, please promise me one thing. Refrain from sighing in the royal palace and conduct yourself in a manner befitting a princess.”

“Why, of course.” There was absolutely no trace of her former gloom.

At that moment, Alice could have done a little jig. Never in a million years would she have guessed she would receive Rin’s blessing to openly search for Iska.

“Ah, I’m looking forward to it. Just you wait, Iska!”

“Yes... *I’m looking forward to it, too.* ”

Alice had yet to notice—that as Rin parroted her, her eyes glinted suspiciously.

While Alice was already getting excited for her reunion with Iska, Rin had clearly prepared entirely different plans for dealing with the swordsman.

It would later become clear that the effects of this attendant’s decision would eventually ripple out and engulf the Empire and the Nebulis Sovereignty.

But for the moment, Alice and Iska were none the wiser.

CHAPTER 1



An Arbitrary Decision, Missed Connections, Wrenched Hearts

1

“I’m going to have all four of you enter the Nebulis Sovereignty undetected.”

“Your special mission is to infiltrate the Sovereignty. Then capture the current Nebulis queen.”

The capital city of Yunmelngen—more specifically, Sector Three. This was the military area, which was isolated from both the residential and commercial districts.

Inside a military-base conference room...

“You’re taking this joke too far, Saint Disciple.” Voice cut through the silence. “You always say crazy things, but this time it’s really not funny.”

The one who spoke up was Jhin Syulargun, a young man with spiky silver hair and a masculine face. The sniper rifle that never left his side was propped up on the wall behind him.

“That’s what I think, at least.”

“...I agree.” Iska gave a small nod when Jhin looked at him pointedly.

Iska was a seventeen-year-old boy with blackish-brown hair. Born and raised in the Empire, he was a young soldier and a member of the Imperial army, serving alongside Jhin. To go into further detail, he was part of the Special Defense for Humankind, Third Division.

As the name implied, their duty was to defend humanity from the witches. He was an Imperial soldier who had been entrusted with that critical mission.

“As far as I’m aware, even the espionage unit struggles to sneak

across the border into Sovereign land. Has the situation changed?"

"Not at all. You've got exactly the right impression, Isk," the bespectacled officer replied with a grin. "Their royal palace is filled with ruthless guards. No one has ever been able to infiltrate the palace while the queen's been present. But that's exactly what would make pulling off this mission impressive, don't you think?"

Risya In Empire. Her shrewd visage was paired with the black-rimmed glasses that completed her trademark look. Though she came across as the secretary of a very important corporate president or a savvy businesswoman, she was actually an officer who possessed enough physical strength and skill in combat to put most male soldiers to shame.

In other words, she was a genius, a masterful jack-of-all-trades.

While her fellow officers were busy jostling for position, she'd devoted herself to shooting up the ranks, eventually getting selected to become a Saint Disciple—and continued to rise in status until she was assigned to the fifth seat. At present, she worked as the right-hand woman to the throne itself.

That was the woman addressing them. "That's why I'm dead serious about this topic—well, *order*, I suppose."

"And who is this order from?"

"From the Eight Great Apostles, duh. What's up, Isk? It's not like you to ask about what you should already know." Behind the lenses of her glasses, she narrowed her eyes, bringing her long eyelashes close together.

Her gaze was both suspicious and charming.

"Well, I'm glad I kept it a surprise. I had no idea you'd be so enthusiastic."

"We're not—"

"Oh? What a surprise. I had no idea you could look so reluctant, Isk." Risya put a hand to her hip, peering into his face as though he was a curiosity. "Is there anything a former Saint Disciple can't do?"

"This is an impossible challenge. I've gotten unreasonable orders before, but I feel like this one isn't even in the same league as the others," Iska answered, his voice strained.

In contrast, Risya did not allow her bewitching gaze to waver.

"Hmm? But, Isk, who put you on bail?"

"The Eight Great Apostles."

"Right. The same bunch who proposed this mission. You must understand what I'm saying."

“...I think I do.”

Iska was a soldier who had committed treason.

A year prior, he had been sentenced to life in prison after he'd broken a witch who'd caught his eye out of jail. He was the Successor of the Black Steel—the one who had studied under the strongest Imperial swordsman. He was just too useful to leave imprisoned.

The highest authority in the Empire belonged to the Eight Great Apostles.

And they were the only reason why Iska had been released from his cell. His imprisonment had been lifted at their suggestion.

“I'm telling you this for your own good, Isk. You can't turn down this mission. If you get on their bad side, it's straight back to the dungeons. Hey. Don't look at me like that.” Risya slapped him on the back. “You'll be fine. Plus, the members of Unit 907 are extraordinary, after all.”

“But it's not as though they're going into this blind,” Jhin spat out. “The Eight Great Apostles are involved in this mission. They're gonna string us along in this plan while they work behind the scenes on some scummy scheme.”

“More or less. I'm glad to see you're keeping up, Jhin-Jhin,” she praised him with nonchalance.

“Tell us what the plan is. Right now,” he demanded, refusing to back down even in the face of a Saint Disciple. “The queen of Nebulis shares blood with *that* Founder. She's not the only one, either. There's a whole mob of purebreds in the royal palace. How're you going to have us sneak in there?”

The Founder Nebulis was the very first witch who came into existence a century ago. She had become a legend for protecting the astral mages who had been oppressed at the hands of the Empire and single-handedly fighting against the Imperial military, plunging the capital into a sea of flames.

The Nebulis Sovereignty's royal family was directly descended from the Founder, an exclusive group also known as purebreds.

From the Empire's perspective, the Founder's bloodline was comprised of complete monsters entirely devoid of humanity. They were witches with enough power to annihilate entire Imperial military bases on their own.

To make matters worse, they didn't even know how many purebreds existed in the Nebulis Sovereignty.

“It’s not just the purebreds. In order to cross the border in the first place, we’d need to worry about the astral trial. It’s not as though you wouldn’t know that as a Saint Disciple.”

“You mean needing *astral crests*, right?” Risya winked, clearly implying something. “You’ve got that absolutely right, Jhin-Jhin. The astral trial will certainly be troublesome.”

Hosts of astral power always had a mark somewhere on their body called an astral crest. In the Empire, this was a sign that the affected person was no longer human, but the astral trial used it for another purpose altogether.

At the border, *those without astral crests had limited entry into the Nebulis Sovereignty*.

“Though the Empire used the crest as evidence in witch trials, the Nebulis Sovereignty has done a clever job of twisting that around. Who could have guessed they would use the existence of an astral crest in place of a passport? Humans without astral crests have the potential to be Imperial spies, which is why they can’t easily enter the country.”

Checking for an astral crest was done by simply looking at a person’s skin.

Because of that, it was a laborious act for people from the Empire to cross the border.

“The espionage unit has trouble with getting around it. If you’re from the Empire, you’re just a normal human without an astral crest, after all. They’re usually discovered right away.” Risya shrugged as though in defeat. “Even when people from the neutral cities go in or out of the Sovereignty, they’re put under strict surveillance. It doesn’t matter whether our espionage unit is the best in the world; getting past the border is virtually impossible.”

“Exactly. So what are you going to do about tha—?”

“*But there is a way.*”

“...What?”

“A way to sneak into the Sovereignty even if you’re an Imperial citizen.”

Jhin’s eyes narrowed—in surprise and suspicion. The Saint Disciple of the fifth seat noticed this and was savoring his reaction.

“Just wait three more days, and you’ll see.”

“You’re still not going to tell us? I heard that the other units already started training maneuvers.”

“Oh? Well, well, Isk. I see you’re itching to go.”

“There’s no way someone wouldn’t be interested after you phrased it that way.”

Risya was up to her usual tricks.

Iska understood that and nodded.

“We need time to prepare. Our entire unit would ordinarily be training for the special mission right now—if we hadn’t been ordered to secure the vortex.”

“Mm-hmm?”

“If we don’t prep, there’s a chance we’ll be the only ones who can’t keep up.”

Iska and the others weren’t the only ones tasked with the infiltration of the Sovereignty. The Eight Great Apostles had intended for this to be a large-scale operation. There were as many as twenty units just for the operation teams, and they had picked out a hundred soldiers from the Imperial military’s cream of the crop.

...If our unit is the only one that makes a mistake...

...We’d absolutely get caught at the Sovereign border and be tortured.

Iska wished for a permanent peace between the Empire and the Sovereignty. He couldn’t let this be the end of the line for him.

“I wish I could settle your concerns, Isk, but alas, it’ll take us two more days to prepare the *treatment*. That’s why we’re on hold for three days.”

“What treatment?”

“Oops, I shouldn’t have said that. Anyway, I’m going to head out before I let anything else slip. Bye! See ya around, Isk, Jhin-Jhin, and—”

Just as she’d turned to leave, the Saint Disciple twisted her head back to peer at them. Behind her glasses, her eyes crinkled with the mirth of a mischievous child.

“Were the details of the operation a bit too much for you, Mismis?”

“.....”

“Oh, I knew she’d pass out. Oh well.”

There was no answer.

She dotingly looked down at the pale captain collapsed on the conference room floor and the girl with a ponytail who held her up.

“Well, see ya, Nens. Make sure you relay the details of this meeting to her.”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

“Excellent reply. You’re such a good kid, Nens. You too, Isk and Jhin-Jhin. All of you from Unit 907 are real cuties. And equally capable.”

Her combat boots echoed as the fifth seat of the Saint Disciples, Risya In Empire, jauntily left the conference room.

2

The members of Unit 907 were the only ones who remained in the conference room.

“Captain? Are you okay?” Iska bent down to the petite captain slumped on the floor.

She was the unit leader Mismis Klass.

Though she was still dazed, her childish features were adorable, and her blue hair curled away from her face, suiting her petite form well. She looked as though she was in her mid-teens and could have easily been mistaken as the youngest in the unit. In reality, she was a grown adult at the age of twenty-two. And she was their full-fledged superior.

“Risya just left.”

“...”

No response.

Though Risya had said Mismis had passed out, she was conscious, and her eyes were open. It was just that she was so stunned that she had slumped over and still couldn’t get up.

...I’m not surprised she fell over.

...I mean, she just had to listen to that whole conversation after everything that happened.

She had fallen over after receiving a double serving of shocking news. It was completely understandable.

“Captain, Captain?” While Captain Mismis’s head lay on her lap, Nene gently smacked the captain’s cheeks.

Nene Alkastone was a girl with voluminous red hair put up in a ponytail. She was the unit communications engineer and a famous top-ranked engineer.

“Commanderrrrrr. Wakey-wakey. We need to come up with a plan, or we’ll be in hot water. Aren’t you going to be in the most trouble, Captain?”

“It’s no use, Nene. She won’t be able to move for at least half a day.” Jhin leaned against the wall as though he had given up. Checking the outside of the room carefully, the young man with silver hair lowered his voice to a hush.

“This is the second bout of bad news she’s gotten. Not much time has passed since her world got turned upside down after *becoming a witch* , and she now has the impossible task of infiltrating the Sovereignty forced onto her. Telling her to keep it together is unreasonable given the situation.”

“Hmm. But I’d really like her to feel better.” Nene patted Captain Mismis’s head gently. “C’mon. Don’t feel down, Captain. I’ll even go out to eat barbecue with you today. How about we get some delicious food in our bellies and perk up?”

“...Oh...b-barbecue...!”

“That’s seriously what woke you up, boss? Hey, Iska, Nene, no need to worry about her. As long as she’s still a glutton, the boss is as good as rain.” Half-exasperated, Jhin watched the petite captain spring back to life.

“Huh?! Wait, what was I doing...?!”

“You were completely out, Captain. That’s how you’ve been ever since Risya started explaining the special mission.” Iska filled a cup from the water dispenser. He handed the captain the cup, which held cold water up to the very brim. “Here, take this.”

“Th-thank you, Iska...” After she adorably downed the contents, she took a deep breath and finally regained some composure. The first thing she did was check the state of her clothes.

Her jacket was off, leaving her in nothing but a white shirt. She looked at the undone buttons on her sleeve and fearfully lifted the fabric, as though recalling something. The shifting left her upper arm bare.

“...I knew it...wasn’t a dream...” Her smile was bittersweet, fragile.

Mismis gazed at the emerald pattern that had set in on her upper arm.

It was the astral crest of a witch.

The mysterious pattern on her shoulder could be mistaken for a tattoo—if it wasn’t for the telltale faint glow. That was what gave it

away as the sign of someone who had been infected by the inexplicable planetary energy—astral power.

“Am I a witch now...?”

“Jackpot. You’ve got that astral crest, after all. That said, you conking out might have been the one silver lining in this situation.” Jhin jerked his chin toward the door. “Flailing around while trying to hide it would’ve come off as insanely unnatural. If you’d been awake and trying to pretend you didn’t have an astral crest, that Saint Disciple would’ve definitely picked up on it.”

To the Saint Disciple Risya, it probably seemed as though Mismis had passed out from the shock of being ordered to carry out the impossible undertaking of infiltrating the Sovereignty. And mercifully, it was a big reason why Risya hadn’t noticed the astral crest.

“A-and if she *had* ...?”

“You already know. Worst case, you’re executed for being a mage who *infiltrated* the Empire. But if you turned yourself in for getting infected after falling into the vortex, I’m sure your sentence would be lighter. Even then, the best you can hope for is life imprisonment like Iska.”

“...Right.” The Imperial-captain-turned-witch let out a heavy sigh.

Iska mulled over the recent events.

“Maybe you should be more worried about your captain?”

“And now I will take my leave. I hope we meet again, Imperial warrior of unknown name.”

When Iska had fought them, Kissing the purebred and the man in the mask had decided to drop Mismis, their prisoner of war, into the vortex to cover their retreat.

...That masked guy might have kicked the captain into the vortex, but there’s no way he would have assumed this would happen to her.

A tumble into the vortex could be compared to falling into an active volcanic crater. But unlike lava, astral energy was innocuous to the ordinary human. Iska had fallen into the vortex and came out unscathed. Only Captain Mismis had struck the “jackpot”—meaning she was compatible enough with the latent energy inside the vortex to become an astral mage.

“Captain, I think I already know the answer, but were you listening to Risya’s explanation of our mission?”

“...Nope.”

“Do you feel confident you’d remember if I was to explain it to you right now?”

“...Nope.”

“It’s no use. I’d thought this was the case, but there’s no way we can infiltrate the Sovereignty in this condition.” Jhin crossed his arms.

Normally, he would make a scathing remark or two around this point, but he had clearly decided this wasn’t the time. Just watching Mismis’s plight was too painful.

“Uh... Um... Sorry... I’ll try to get ahold of myself.”

“Don’t worry about that—just rest,” Jhin ordered, though his tone was gentle. “Hey, Nene, take the captain out to barbecue tonight. And for breakfast and lunch tomorrow, too.”

“For all three meals?!”

“She needs to recuperate. You can tell relaxing and remaining composed are out of the question right now. If this keeps up, there’s no way we can go on the special mission.”

They would end up being annihilated. But Jhin didn’t say that out loud, out of consideration for the captain in front of him.

“I agree. We have two days before we need to go, so, Captain, let’s pass on today’s training. Jhin and I will do some research on astral crests.”

What Iska needed to find was a way to hide Mismis’s.

Would covering it with a skin-toned bandage work?

It might, but there was a chance she would be caught by the detection equipment that was sprinkled all over Imperial territory. Just as the Nebulis Sovereignty was wary of infiltration by the Imperial military, the Empire was similarly paranoid.

“Jhin and I will try to come up with something for the rest of today. Nene, you’ll chaperone the captain. Make sure no one sees the astral crest. Also, please try to refrain from taking a bath today, Captain. Someone might see it in the public bath. Just...be cautious.”

“O-okay!”

“Nene, sorry to ask you to take care of the captain. If you can, stick by her when she sleeps, too.”

“Leave it to me. I’ll sleep in her room.” Nene hugged her

superior close. "You two be careful, too. If anything happens, I'll drop you a line, but if we use our devices, anything we say will be recorded by headquarters."

"We'll talk about anything important in the barracks. Well, I think that's it." With that parting note, Iska left Nene and Captain Mismis.

Rushing to catch up with Jhin, who had started walking on ahead, Iska departed from the conference room.

3

The sun scorched the earth, searing the parched ground that hardened and cracked under its smoldering heat. Sparse weeds and trees dotted what had become a desert.

These were the features of the Vishada wastelands.

A single ATV sped through the yet-to-be-developed flat of land.

"It's been a while since you've driven me anywhere, Iska."

"And a long time since I've driven in general." He looked out of the corner of his eye at Captain Mismis, who reclined in the passenger seat. "I'm kinda nervous, since we always leave the driving to Nene."

"Yeah, I get what you mean. Especially with a cute girl like me sitting right next to you."

"...Uh-huh, sure."

If Jhin had been with them, he would have promptly retorted: A girl? *You're too old for that*. That said, Mismis was actually on his mind.

...She's not as pale as yesterday, and she's talking a lot more.

...What a relief. I wonder if this drive is a good break from everything.

Spending time in the capital was getting a bit claustrophobic. When Nene suggested they go out for a bit, the two had decided to take a car ride, and they were steadily buffeted by the wind as they drove.

"You made sure your skin-toned bandage is on, right?"

"Yeah, it's perfect! I'm amazed—I can't even tell it's there in the mirror!" Captain Mismis clapped a hand on her shoulder.

They had used medical tape as a concealer. The product was originally intended for covering up surgical scars left on the skin. It

basically acted as a sticker that could hide wounds with one simple application.

“And it’s water-resistant, right?”

“You should be fine in the shower. Jhin found some good stuff—yours are really thin. I’m glad the color matches your skin.”

“...But there isn’t a way to deal with the astral energy, right?”

“Based on our experiments yesterday, there doesn’t seem to be any good options.”

Astral energy was something naturally emitted by astral mages. When Nene had tried approaching Mismis with a gauge, the needle reacted. Even if the astral crest’s glow could be hidden with tape, the actual energy was still readily apparent.

However, there was one exception.

“If we had the bandage of the ex-captain Shanorotte, then that might be possible.”

“I think that’s probably something the Sovereignty came up with...”

“Shanorotte Gregory was born and raised in the Nebulis Sovereignty.”

“All those times you Imperial scum have called us ‘witches’! All that time I had to hide my astral crest! You could never understand how I feel!”

Shanorotte was a spy from the Sovereignty who had pretended to be an Imperial soldier for nearly a decade. Though she had also been using a bandage to hide her astral crest, hers had been able to conceal her astral energy in its entirety.

...Captain Mismis is probably right. Whatever Shanorotte used was probably based on Sovereign research.

...They obviously have more astral-power research than we do.

Meanwhile, the Empire had prohibited research on astral energy, deeming it taboo.

On the other hand, the Paradise of Witches was naturally ahead in their advancements on astral energy compared to the rest of the world.

“Captain Mismis, are you sure you want to go to Ain?”

“Yeah, because—” The petite captain leaned back in the passenger seat. The wind rushed in through the window, whipping

her bangs. Instead of her Imperial battle uniform, Mismis wore a long-sleeved shirt and pants. Though the clothes had been chosen to hide her astral crest, she also looked more mature than usual in this outfit, which covered most of her skin.

“—because it’s the only place I can be right now.”

If the fact that she was a witch was revealed anywhere within the Empire, the authorities would execute her. On the other hand, the Nebulis Sovereignty would think she was an Imperial spy.

She was unwanted and unneeded, leaving her in limbo when it came to deciding where she belonged in relation to the two largest countries in the world.

“I think I’ll feel more at ease in the neutral city. It’ll be fine even if they discover the astral crest... *Sigh*. Right. Maybe I’ll run off to a neutral city instead of turning myself in to the Empire for a life behind bars.”

“...”

It was just a self-deprecating joke. But even though he knew she wasn’t being serious, Iska couldn’t find it in him to reply.

...She’s not wrong.

...That’s the safest option for Captain Mismis to live out a peaceful life.

However, she wasn’t in a position to do that. Her parents were Imperial citizens, as were her friends. There was no way she would move outside the Empire so easily.

Most importantly, Iska knew that Mismis still wanted to continue being the captain of Unit 907.

“Captain?”

“Hmm?”

“Nene, Jhin, and I have all got your back. So keep your head held high, too.”

“...”

Silence—with the sound of the whipping wind.

“...Gosh.”

One tear welled up in her eye, blurring under her eyelid. The captain used the tip of her finger to brush it away.

“Don’t make me cry. You know that’s my soft spot.”

The neutral city came into view.

On the other side of the horizon, they caught sight of the city that rose out of the plains.

Rewinding to a century prior.

The Heavenly Empire was a state that was as formidable as a fortress. The superpower that the world commonly called the “Empire” possessed more than enough power to realize their hegemonic aspirations. They kept a full 60 percent of all the world’s countries as their vassal states. Many considered this the peak of their golden age.

But then the Empire came into contact with the Secret of the Celestial Body.

Astral power had surged out from the planet’s core, possessing humans and bestowing them with near-magical abilities that wouldn’t have been out of place in a storybook. Girls and women became *witches*, while boys and men were *sorcerers*.

The problem was that the abilities they gained were *too powerful*. Swathes of people had suddenly gained astral powers that surpassed even the capabilities of heavy weapons. The people of the Empire, who learned to fear this power, began to persecute any who had it.

On the other hand, those with astral power weren’t content to simply allow themselves to wallow in oppression.

The Founder Nebulis, accompanied by many of her allies, established the Nebulis Sovereignty, a new country that was meant to oppose the Empire from its inception.

On one side was the Empire, which was hell-bent on eradicating all witches and sorcerers.

On the other side was the Nebulis Sovereignty, which burned with a deep desire for vengeance.

The strife between the two superpowers showed no signs of dying down, even in the present day, a full century later.

“...And yet...”

Then there was the neutral city of Ain.

A girl looked over the plaza. As she stood with a parasol of thin cloth held above her, she looked inconceivably graceful and exuded a timeless elegance.

“Everything is at peace, filled with civilians who do not know the sound of gunshots and explosives. I’m jealous.”

Throughout the persistent conflict between the Empire and Nebulis Sovereignty that spanned a whole century, this was a city

that hadn't joined a side. The people who lived here were brimming with smiles and good energy.

"How lovely." While appreciating the songs of street musicians, Alice closed her parasol.

"Lady Alice, don't you want some shade?"

"I didn't come here to take a stroll. A parasol would just get in the way if I'm trying to find someone, wouldn't it?" She handed it over to her attendant, Rin.

...The sun is strong, but we can't do anything about that.

...If I keep the parasol up, he might not notice me, either.

Looking around the plaza, she carefully observed the faces of the nearby tourists.

"Rin."

"Yes?"

"It's the third day. What's the meaning of this?"

She wanted to see him.

Keeping that thought close, Alice had come all the way from the Sovereignty.

So what is the meaning of my target not making an appearance in this very city like he's supposed to?!

"It was the same yesterday and the day before. I went to all that trouble to adjust my schedule to come. Why isn't he here? I mean, before this, I would always catch sight of him by simply being in the same city."

"Those were the exceptions."

"...I know that."

When Rin replied as though it was obvious, Alice pouted in disappointment.

She knew that.

Alice was a Sovereign princess and Iska was an Imperial soldier—two people born under completely different circumstances. The odds a pair like them would meet not one but two or three times were astronomically small.

...But that's not the point.

...I feel like I'd be able to meet him again despite that. That's why I came here, after all.

The string of fate that connected them hadn't been broken yet.

Not even the vortex had managed that. They were linked by a destiny that couldn't be severed by astral power, no matter how powerful. Alice believed that with everything she had.

“Rin, you agreed that I should come to the neutral city, right?”

“Yes. But there is a chance that the swordsman got caught in the vortex’s surge and per—”

“He’s alive.” Alice didn’t wait for Rin to finish talking as she shook her head. “Iska is alive. And we’re finally going to settle this.”

“...If you say so, Lady Alice.”

“Anyway, you helped me search for him yesterday and the day before, but let’s split up today. I’ll look for him ahead on the main road.”

“Understood. I will check around from the plaza to the entrance.”

“Call me over if you find him.”

Rin bowed politely while Alice started to walk away with purpose in every step.

Alice quickly shrank in the distance, pressing forward with speed. Even from behind, her figure framed by billowing hair was lovely. That most certainly was not only Rin’s personal opinion.

“In an ideal world, we would never come across that man again.” As she watched her dear mistress depart, Rin let out a weak sigh. “But I suppose Lady Alice won’t listen once her mind is set...”

This was unprecedented. For Alice to go so far and be so persistent about a single Imperial soldier...

Of course, Alice was aware that she was feared as the terrifying Ice Calamity Witch by the Imperial populace.

“I hate the Empire.”

“I’m going to defeat the Empire. I’m going to create a world where astral mages can live without worry.”

How many times had Rin heard her say those exact words?

Plus, that ambition was also Rin’s *raison d’être*. It had become her dream to unify the world by Alice’s side, serving as her right hand.

But...

“Iska is alive. And we’re finally going to settle this.”

Rin couldn’t help but feel like their goals were slowly diverging. *Alice went from defeating the government to defeating Iska.*

Moreover, Alice wasn’t insisting on this course of action because she despised Iska. It seemed almost as though she was betting her own dignity on her impending fight with him.

...You can't keep doing this, Lady Alice.

...Someone as noble as you shouldn't be concerning yourself with an Imperial soldier!

Alice might become queen one day, but a single Imperial soldier had swayed her heart this much already. That was inexcusable.

The Nebulis Sovereignty itself was no monolith. The other three Nebulis bloodlines with succession rights were constantly watching for a chance to seize the queen's throne.

There was the Zoa family led by Lord Mask.

Though they never acted openly, the Hydra family would be maneuvering all the same.

On top of that, Alice's own elder and younger sisters would be dedicating themselves to becoming more powerful and preparing themselves for the conclave, the consecration ceremony for the queen.

"Lady Alice, you cannot afford to be so obsessed about an Imperial soldier at a time like this. Right now, you should be gathering supporters and increasing your strength."

That was exactly why Rin had to do it.

"I will be the one to end your connection with that Imperial swordsman."

She made a resolution to take decisive action because of her ironclad loyalty to Alice, her mistress.

The attendant spoke as though she was trying to convince herself of that.

5

The arts were in full bloom.

The neutral cities accepted all variety of artisans, who generally despised the strife between the Empire and the Sovereignty, and had created an environment in which an untold amount of culture grew—including everything from painting to music.

And the city of Ain was the capital of opera.

The street musicians often played their songs as they pleased, regaling tourists who were happy to listen. Just laying eyes on the tranquil scene was incredibly soothing.

"I guess it's also Alice's favorite city..." Sitting on a bench covered by the shade to shelter from the sun, Iska watched the

water fountain in the center of the plaza. “Are you doing all right, Captain?”

“...Huh?! H-huh...? Did I fall asleep?”

The captain sitting next to him opened her eyes abruptly.

After dozing off in her seat, she had started to encroach on Iska’s space. When she had slumped over, Iska had supported her before she could completely fall.

“I-I’m sorry about that! Did I do anything weird? U-um... I didn’t talk in my sleep, did I?!”

“Just a little. But it was mumbling, and I couldn’t make out a thing.”

She hadn’t slowly dozed off. She had suddenly lost consciousness; it was almost as though she had fainted, and it was actually worrying Iska quite a bit.

...Well, it seems like she didn’t sleep well yesterday, so it might be because of that.

...I’m glad she’s getting a chance to rest here.

Like Jhin had said, Mismis had taken two successive blows.

The first was her transformation into a witch.

The second was the special mission and its outrageous strategy. All the tension that had built up finally had a chance to vent now that she was outside Imperial territory.

“You can sleep for a little longer if you’d like. I’ll keep watch.”

“N-no way! That would be embarrassing. I’m a grown *lady* . I can’t go around carelessly letting men see what I look like when I’m asleep.”

“You say that, but I don’t think ladies normally go to the movies with a children’s ticket...”

“I mean, that’s something totally unavoidable. When I go to the ticket counter, the nice woman at the window is always like, *Awww, what a cute kid* , and decides on her own to give me the half-off ticket.”

A twenty-two-year-old who still went to the theaters at a kid’s price.

On the other hand, her “boobs and butt are definitely mature,” according to Nene. Mismis’s petite body seemed off-balance with her full-grown bust and hips, so it was within the realm of reason that someone might say she possessed a dangerous sensuality before they would dismiss her as *just young* .

“Yeah. I’m fully energized again!” Captain Mismis stood from

the bench, turning her back to him as though hiding her embarrassment. "I'm going to take a walk to wake myself up. I'll buy us something to drink while I'm out, so you sit tight here."

She didn't wait for his response as her small body sprang into action. She started off at a run.

Iska was left alone on the bench.

The plaza was bustling with families and couples, but most of them were gathered around the fountain. A few were cooling themselves off in the shade of the trees.

"It really was the right choice—bringing the captain along to get her out of the Empire."

The idea had originally been Nene's proposal. Jhin had nudged the captain into going when she hesitated. And Iska had been the one to take her out. The whole operation had been a team effort.

"Now that we've been able to address some of her sleep deprivation, next we'll eat dinner here to cheer her up...and then I guess the rest happens after we get back to the capital."

Jhin and Nene were currently preoccupied with other activities.

The two absentees were researching possible ways to contain Captain Mismis's astral power. The special-mission training would take place in two days. If they couldn't find a solution to the astral-crest issue within that time, even participating in the mission would be incredibly dangerous.

"So...we're supposed to infiltrate the Sovereignty and capture the queen."

Capturing a purebred had been a goal imposed upon Iska from the start.

If he was successful, the achievement would be a stepping-stone toward the overambitious goal of obtaining peace negotiations.

The purebreds were the royal family of Nebulis. If he could capture even one of them, the possibility that the Sovereignty would come to the table for peace talks with the Empire became far more likely.

But capturing *the current Nebulis queen* was too extreme.

...Just try capturing her.

...There's no chance that the Empire—and those Eight Great Apostles in particular—would release the queen.

The war would intensify. The Sovereignty would probably dedicate all its military force in attempts to reclaim her.

The ensuing warfare would make all the previous battles look

like child's play, resulting in a bloodbath that wouldn't end until both countries were ruined.

"Argh, damn it. That's what I thought you would do, you Apostles...!"

"We understand that you wish for peace."

They obviously did understand, but they also clearly had no intention of steering things in that direction—not those Eight Great Apostles.

It wasn't just the upper stratum of the Empire that thought that way. The Nebulis Sovereignty was exactly the same. The fiery thirst for revenge that had lasted for a century still burned within their nation.

".....But I already knew that." Iska turned toward the skies while still sitting on the bench. "None of this is easy. It'll be a thorny road."

How would they hide the captain's transformation into a witch?

If they failed to carry out the special mission they'd been handed by the Eight Great Apostles, they wouldn't come back alive.

On the other hand, if they managed to accomplish all of their mission objectives by some insane stroke of luck and actually captured the Nebulis queen, nothing short of the worst possible future would be waiting for them.

Regardless of the results of the upcoming mission, the tomorrow that Iska wished for didn't seem to exist.

"...Or maybe I'm just overthinking this."

He had to be composed.

It was possible he was being too pessimistic. After all, he had managed to survive fighting directly against the Founder Nebulis, even though it was a close call.

The situation changed moment by moment. In such uncertain times, he was sure the most important thing was to continue upholding his beliefs.

"Because that was true even when I fought Alice..."

"Capture me—if you can."

"You can also eliminate me as you please. You would achieve a step forward in unifying the world, Alice."

They were enemies on the battlefield. It was impossible for them to peacefully coexist—as with fire and ice. They had each confirmed that for themselves.

But at that time, in that moment, he had felt like he had come to a mutual understanding. That was because, rather than looking down on each other's dreams, they had acknowledged them and decided to clash head-on.

Theirs was a battlefield just for the two of them.

The victor would gain the right to reform the world.

...There were no obligations—no Eight Great Apostles or headquarters.

...If settling things with Alice means settling things with the Sovereignty, I wonder just how invigorating that would feel.

But it wasn't as though that was realistic.

Something as convenient as that wouldn't simply appear on its own...

"Phew. It's hot. I wonder if handing off my parasol to Rin was a mistake."

A girl stumbled over into the shade at that very moment.

"I can't believe I've been walking around this whole time. My legs feel like lead. I don't want to think about how Iska might not be here after I searched so hard... Were our meetings up until now really only by chance?"

She was a girl with golden hair, and her ruby eyes had a dignified luster to them. Her healthy red lips were supple and rounded out her shapely face. The dress she wore showed off the outline of her busty and slender physique underneath.

She walked up to him. "Excuse me, would you allow me to share this bench with you?"

"...Alice?"

"Huh?" She scrutinized his face from top to bottom as he sat perched on the bench. It seemed she hadn't recognized him because of the blinding sunlight.

He had to wait only a few seconds.

"*Iskaaaaaaaaaa?!'*" The golden-haired girl raised a shout that echoed throughout the plaza.

At first, she looked surprised. However, steadily, her expression became brighter and brighter as though her face was clearing up right before his eyes.

"I've found you!"

“...Huh? Found me? It wasn’t like I was hiding from you.”

“No, you don’t understand! You have no idea how much I’ve been looking for you over the past three days. Listen and be amazed!”

“You were looking for me?”

“.....Oh.” Alice froze with her finger pointed at him.

She went silent for a while. She retracted her finger, looking slightly embarrassed.

“Never mind.”

“Really?”

“R-really! More importantly... Uh, ummm... Ugh, there were a ton of things I had to say to you, but I can’t remember any of them anymore!”

That’s my line—

Subtly enough to keep Alice from noticing, Iska held a hand to his chest. He was worried that if he didn’t, his thumping heart would have been audible even to her.

Why had his body frozen in nervousness?

...I think I felt this way when we first met.

...Maybe it’s because we haven’t seen each other since we were blown out of the vortex?

Neither of them had any way of knowing what had become of the other.

Perhaps that was why it felt like they hadn’t met in ages.

“...Oh, and...”

Iska found that he suddenly couldn’t think of a conversation topic. As he hesitated, his eyes swam around before eventually landing on his bench.

It was a three-seater. Because Iska sat alone, two of the spots were empty.

“Do you want to sit?”

Alice had probably been walking down the main road for quite some time before finally reaching the cool area of the plaza. Her cheeks were flushed and warm.

“...No. You and I are enemies. *Us* sitting on the same bench. If Rin were here to see it, she’d be livid.”

“Then I’ll stand.”

“Wha—?!”

He stood up in front of her as her mouth hung half-open.

Please help yourself. Indicating the open seat of the bench, he

nodded slightly.

...Even if we're enemies, this is a neutral city.

...It just wouldn't sit right with me to keep an exhausted girl standing this whole time.

"W-wait a moment! I got it. I don't want you to be overly conscious or anything. I want us to be equals... I'll sit here, and you sit there." Alice gracefully took a seat, then indicated with her eyes that Iska should do the same. "There shouldn't be a problem anymore, right?"

"...Okay." Iska returned to his side of the bench.

With an open seat between them, they both watched the plaza fountain.

"..."

"..."

"...I'm relieved. I haven't seen you since back then." Alice spoke in a whisper that almost melted into the breeze, swept away by the winds that fluttered between them.

Her voice was barely there.

Iska probably had caught it only because he was in the path of the wind.

"You weren't injured too badly, right?" This time, her tone was stronger, speaking with the intention of being heard. "I still haven't settled things with you. If you injured yourself so badly that it would take you a year to recover, that would be a problem."

"Of course not. What about you, Alice? It seemed like you were blown pretty far away."

"Me? Y-you can see that for yourself!" She might have been happy that he was worried about her as she puffed out her chest with new vigor. "But how odd. I didn't expect you to be here."

"Odd?"

He had already met her here several times before. It wasn't as though it was unusual for him to be in the neutral city.

"It's odd that you're sitting on this bench at this plaza."

"...Oh. Now that you mention it..." When Alice pointed it out, he finally realized something.

She had stumbled upon him while he was taking a break on a random bench. From Iska's point of view, it was almost like him finding the Saint Disciple Nameless taking five here. *It really is unbelievable.* Would a Saint Disciple, whose pride was their boundless stamina, really require a rest after doing nothing but

wandering around the city streets?

“But you didn’t sit down to take a break because you were tired, right?”

“.....”

“Are you not allowed to tell me?”

“No, I was just lost in thought.”

The back of the bench was made from panels of wood. He looked up at the leaves and branches of the tree as the sunlight streamed down from them.

“A lot of things happened after that battle at the vortex. I haven’t been sure what I should do next this whole time...even today.”

“I wonder if it could be because of a classified Imperial operation?”

“There’s that, too. I can’t tell you what it’s about, though.”

“I know that. I wasn’t thinking of asking you about it.” She nodded along without deceit.

Alice let a bittersweet smile slip through but didn’t pry any further, which was exactly what Iska thought she would do.

“Then can I ask you another question?”

“What?”

“You said, ‘There’s that, *too* .’ It made it seem like there wasn’t just one thing to be worried about.”

“...”

One of his worries was about the special mission. But on top of that, the other concern was regarding the captain.

...I haven’t even thought about it.

...What would happen if Alice found out that Captain Mismis has become an astral mage?

How would the princess and astral mage respond if she found out an Imperial soldier had astral power? Iska genuinely couldn’t think of an answer. Though, of course, that was a secret he absolutely could not reveal.

“Well, it at least doesn’t have anything to do with an operation.”

“Oh, then I wonder what it could be?”

Alice let her politely perched posture crumble and turned toward him.

Her expression was pleasant, but her eyes glittered with inquisitiveness that gave away how incredibly curious she was.

“What is it? Why don’t you tell me? Are you really such a worrywart? If it’s not about an operation, then you can tell me, can’t you?”

“...I obviously can’t.”

“It’s all right. I can keep a secret. If it’s really that important, I won’t tell anyone except Rin.”

“Then you’re no good at keeping secrets at all!”

This is bad. Though she was the princess of the second-largest country in the world, she was also a seventeen-year-old, which placed her right at the age where she lived for gossip and rumors.

“But now I’m even more curious. It’ll just be between the two of us.”

“Even though we’re enemies?”

“We are, but we have a truce here.”

She was probably doing it subconsciously—leaning toward him from her seat. Alice closed the distance between them and looked at him with upturned eyes...

“Please?”

“Lady Alice.”

“Eeeep?!” The golden-haired girl sprang up, whipping around to face the brown-haired girl who had soundlessly snuck up behind her. “R-Rin?! Th-this isn’t what you think! Nothing’s going on!”

“...If there was nothing going on, then why would you be getting close to him?”

“It’s Iska’s fault!”

“Why would it be *my* fault?!” Iska jumped to his feet as Alice pointed at him.

He recognized Alice’s attendant—Rin, if he remembered correctly. Unlike Alice, who had jumped into the vortex, Iska hadn’t come across Rin at Mudor Canyon. In fact, he hadn’t seen her face in weeks.

“...So you survived, Imperial swordsman.” The attendant showed obvious scorn on her face. Her enmity, which she did nothing to try to hide, was a natural reaction given his identity.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. Lady Alice, I was looking for you. You were walking without your parasol, after all, so I thought you would be resting somewhere. This is quite the perfect spot, isn’t it?”

Rin pulled cans of juice out of the bag in her left hand.

Iska assumed there were probably two—one for her and one for Alice—but just then, the attendant pushed the second into Iska’s

chest.

“...Here.”

“Uh?”

“For you. Think of it as an act of generosity from Lady Alice.”

The girl seemed indignant. Though she gripped the can as though she was holding a knife, it seemed that her intention really was to give it to him.

“H-hurry up and take it.”

“...Thank you.” The chilled can felt good against his hot palm.

“Well, now. Someone’s thoughtful.”

“I am not in the habit of lending a hand to an enemy, but considering where we are, it’s only proper...”

Alice immediately started to drink her juice. Following suit, Iska opened his drink and took a sip, letting its tart fragrance tickle his nose.

“Is this apple juice? It smells different.”

“Lemon apple. Don’t you have any in the Empire?”

“I don’t think I’ve heard of it before. Though I don’t really know much about fruit in general.” He drank the juice as he turned to his thoughts.

...Come to think of it, Captain Mismis has been out for a while.

...She hasn’t been back since she said she’d go on a walk.

What came to Iska’s mind was the face of his childish captain. She was late. Had something happened?

Maybe someone had discovered the astral crest on her left arm, and there had been a commotion.

Or the astral power possessing her had gone berserk, causing her powers to activate and draw the attention of the city guards.

He couldn’t say that either was impossible with the captain’s present state.

“Iska?”

“Hmm?”

“You were worrying again just now, weren’t you? You looked like you were lost in thought.”

Alice, who had already finished her juice, was staring at him.

“C’mon—what are you so anxious about?”

“...It’s a secret.”

“But it hasn’t got anything to do with the operation. You can tell me, can’t you?”

“You know, even I should be allowed to have a secret or—”

—*two*. He hadn't been able to say the last word of the sentence.

...*Huh?*

...*What's going on?*

He couldn't move his body. His knees had slackened, collapsing, and he only managed to keep himself from falling over by sitting on the bench in a panic.

But that was all he could do.

He couldn't stand. He couldn't even look up at the two girls with him.

"Iska? Iska, what's wrong?"

"....."

Clunk. The can slipped from his hand and tumbled onto the ground.

His head went white...

And with that, Iska crumpled onto the bench, losing consciousness.

6

It had been poisoned.

There were two reasons why the Successor of the Black Steel hadn't noticed the minuscule amount the drink had been laced with.

First, he had already been preoccupied by worries about his superior. When he had encountered a strange flavor, poison wasn't the first thing that crossed his mind.

And the second was because he didn't believe Alice would attempt something so despicable. He trusted her.

However, Iska had misjudged the entire situation.

For it hadn't been Alice who had plotted to poison the juice but Alice's attendant, Rin.

"Iska? Iska, what's the matter with you?!"

The young boy had collapsed sideways on the bench, immobile.

His eyes were closed, and he did not so much as twitch. Even from Alice's perspective, his behavior was obviously strange.

...What?

...What in the world has happened?!

He didn't respond even when she shook him.

Since he was letting out shallow breaths, he couldn't be dead. But how could it be normal for the greatest swordsman in the Empire to suddenly collapse?

"Lady Alice, I apologize..." Rin spoke as though dumbfounded, eyes darting around in fear.

"What?"

"...I poisoned him. I mixed a sedative into his drink."

"You did *what* ?!"

This wasn't something Alice had ordered. Why would Rin do that voluntarily? If they were anywhere else, Alice would have reprimanded her for acting out of line, but she stopped herself from doing that in public.

"I-it's not what you think, Lady Alice...!" Rin shook her head vigorously.

Okay, so she mixed poison into the juice, which she just confessed to. Why does she still look so unnerved?

"Explain yourself."

"I thought that he would never drink something so obviously laced with poison. I mean, I used something that was a touch sour—which he noticed."

"Is this apple juice? It smells different."

Now that Rin mentioned it, Alice recalled that Iska had made a comment to that effect, even though it had totally gone over her head in that moment.

"I didn't think he'd willingly drink something I had offered in the first place."

"...Then why poison it?"

"To convince him that the Sovereignty tried to poison him—I thought that would be reason enough." Rin cast her gaze down at the boy lying in a crumpled heap. "I won't hide anything else from you. I figured this swordsman would realize you were a force to be reckoned with if he thought we tried to poison him. And that would give him pause before he chatted with you or met up with you again in the neutral city."

"What?! Rin, you...!"

"All I wanted was to end this strange relationship. Lady Alice, you might become the queen of our country one day."

“.....”

“You can’t be wasting time on a random Imperial foot soldier. While you’re traveling out of the country, those eyeing the conclave are already building up their forces.”

Alice had nothing to say to that.

Her attendant had spoken the irrefutable truth to the one vying for the throne. The internal struggle within the Sovereignty was just that bitter.

Even within the House of Lou, which shared the bloodline of the current queen, Alice had to contend with her older sister, Elletear; her younger sister, Sisbell; on top of two other bloodlines as well...

“The planet is filled with rage.”

“It wants us to use astral power to destroy the Empire. The current queen is too soft in her policy.”

There was Lord Mask of the House of Zoa.

And also the House of Hydra, though they didn’t act in any discernible way.

In order to become queen, she had to become the representative among the three Lou sisters and then win in the conclave against the Zoa and Hydra houses.

“I never thought he’d actually fall for it...” Even though she’d been the one to lay the trap in the first place, Rin peered down in shock at the sleeping boy. “Also, it’s starting to grate on my nerves that he’s sleeping like a baby.”

“Yes. He’s fast asleep. It’s almost palpable how confident he is that he’ll be okay...”

The boy lay on his side atop the bench.

Was it because the sedative was strong? Or was this a sign of his hubris?

The sight of his peaceful slumber was enough to lessen Alice’s and Rin’s aggravation. It almost made them wonder if he was just pretending to be asleep.

“...This was a miscalculation on my part. If I knew this would be the case, I would have used something lethal.”

“Rin.” Alice warned her attendant for saying the unthinkable.

...Ugh, seriously!

...From Iska’s perspective, it’ll look like I was the one who poisoned

him.

Thankfully, it had just been a sedative. But how was she going to apologize to him when he woke up? Would he even forgive her?

“Lady Alice, you have no need to concern yourself with this.”

“No, Rin, that’s not the issue. I...”

She knew it, even without Rin saying it out loud.

“Ever since we ran into each other in the neutral city, something weird has been building up in my chest...”

“...I know this feeling makes me a failure of a princess. I came here intending to end all that.”

Alice felt special feelings for him. She was willing to acknowledge that—even though she couldn’t quite put a finger on her emotions, which compelled her ever since their first meeting in the neutral city.

The whole time that she had been at the royal palace, even when she ate her meals or prepared for bed at night, Iska’s voice and silhouette never left her mind. Alice knew that as long as she intended to continue being a princess, this haze did her no favors. She needed to settle things with him in order to clear it all away.

And yet...

“Ugh, seriously? How could you do this to me, Rin? How can I let things end like this?!”

“There is only one thing left to do.”

“What?”

“We’ll take him with us.” Rin hoisted up his body. Of course, carrying a taller man was a breeze for her. But there was another issue at hand.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?! Wait, Rin. W-we’re taking him? ...But where?!”

“To the Sovereignty. A former Saint Disciple will make a valuable prisoner.”

Alice finally understood what it meant when people said they doubted their ears.

While it was true that they poisoned Iska in a neutral city... attempting to *kidnap* him seemed something else altogether.

“No one will pay us any mind. We’re just taking care of a friend after he had a good time and exhausted himself. No one will even

think twice.”

As long as they didn’t get caught, there would be no problems. If there were no witnesses in the neutral city, it wouldn’t look like the Sovereignty had any hand in this. Alice certainly understood Rin’s thought process.

However, she couldn’t overlook that as a princess of the Sovereignty.

“Are you serious?! You can’t! The neutral city won’t forgive us for doing this!”

“But it’s already been done.” Rin started walking with Iska in tow.

“That’s not true. If we take him to the Sovereignty...”

There would be torture, then life imprisonment.

It wouldn’t even be odd to think a former Saint Disciple would be considered too dangerous to keep in captivity and executed.

...No. I can’t allow that.

...I won’t accept that this is how our connection ends!

“Rin, we can’t do this. That’s an order! We can’t take him to the Sovereignty, especially not to the central state! Just think about it. If Iska breaks out, it’ll be a catastrophe. The royal palace would be right there.”

Alice’s mind was spinning as she desperately thought of reasons not to cooperate.

“If Iska goes on a rampage there, it’ll be a disaster. Right?”

“...Understood.” Rin stopped in her tracks with the boy still in her arms. “Then we will go to the thirteenth state, Alcatroz—a commonwealth of the Sovereignty that’s closest to this place.”

“Alcatroz?”

“Yes. It’s the best place to keep watch over him.”

What exactly did Rin mean by that?

As a princess, Alice immediately understood what her attendant had in mind.

But was that fine? Uncertainty lingered over her. Was it really the best idea to spirit Iska away from this place?

...I still have time. I need to hold out.

... As long as there are no witnesses who saw the Sovereignty catch an Imperial soldier in a trap, I can still fix things.

She would wait until Iska was awake and apologize—to totally erase what had happened.

But Alice’s calculations collapsed moments later...

“...Iska?”

She recognized this adorable voice and heard the crinkled *thud* of a shopping bag hitting the ground.

“—?!” Alice whipped around to find an Imperial soldier who was in the middle of strolling over from the fountain toward their shaded bench.

It was Captain Mismis.

There is a witness.

In an instant, Alice prepared herself to cross a bridge of no return. After seeing Iska in Rin’s arms, Mismis must have immediately pieced together the situation.

An Imperial soldier, tricked by a Sovereign princess. Has he been... poisoned?

Even if they left him behind, word would spread that the Sovereignty had committed a crime in a neutral city—anything less was unthinkable now that there was a witness.

“Wha—? Iska—”

“Don’t make a scene!” she barked—sternly but quietly enough that her voice wouldn’t carry across the plaza. From the intensity of the command, Mismis’s foot froze in place, stopping her from advancing any farther.

...This isn’t what it looks like. I didn’t intend for this to happen.

...But because you’re here, I can’t turn back anymore.

Of course, Alice didn’t let any of these emotions reach her face. With Mismis in front of her, she couldn’t afford to show any weakness as a princess.

“This swordsman is an enemy to the Sovereignty,” Alice managed to choke out to the dazed captain, biting down on the inside of her cheek all the while. “We will be taking him.”

“.....”

“We’re heading to the thirteenth state of the Sovereignty, Alcatroz, with him as our prisoner. The conditions of his release will be discussed at a later time. You are to stand by for further communication.”

“...I.....” Mismis’s expression became taut.

Her subordinate was being taken hostage before her very eyes—and in a neutral city, no less. Forgive them? Impossible. Alice knew that, almost to a painful degree.

“I’ll promise you this. His life is—”

“You cowards !”

The dam burst.

In a suppressed voice, her youthful face red and swollen, the petite captain screamed.

“What did you do to Iska?! You knew the rules of this place and still dared to act so brazenly. Is that the way witches do things?!”

“...I have no obligation to speak to you.”

What could Alice possibly offer as an explanation, other than her true intentions?

The issue left was how to move forward. She needed to think of how to deal with Iska now that she had officially taken him hostage. Alice’s and Rin’s skin broke out in goose bumps from what was unfolding.

“Giiiiiiiiive Iska baaaaaack!”

It was a shimmer of astral power.

A fluorescent green glow flowed out of the captain’s left arm as she shouted through her tears. The light was so bright that the fabric of her jacket couldn’t hide it; Alice and Rin had seen this exact light a few days prior...when they had been at the vortex.

Alice knew that Iska and the captain had plummeted into its opening.

...The vortex dried up.

...Lord Mask assumed the astral power returned to the planet’s core.

But he had been mistaken.

The light glowing from this captain’s arm clearly said otherwise.

“It *can’t* be—”

The light intensified, a sign of an imminent astral attack.

This is bad. There was no mistaking that this captain had been bestowed with this power. Not that she could be called a mage yet. There was no way she knew how to properly control it.

But her roiling emotions could still cause her latent astral power to run wild.

“Freeze!”

“—Gh.”

Alice managed to ice over the captain’s ankle, causing her to fall to the ground, immobilized. The ice would melt soon enough, and as long as her frozen ankle remained tucked among the blades of

grass, not a soul in the plaza would notice what had happened.

“...I did that out of the kindness of my heart—a gift from me to you, newly minted astral mage.”

That hadn’t been a defensive measure. Alice had used her astral power out of concern for Mismis.

“I don’t know what type of astral power you have, but if you accidentally launched an attack, you would have been breaking the rules of the neutral city.”

“...”

“Rin, let’s go.”

Alice spun on her heel, pivoting away from the crumpled captain, and started on her way—chewing her lip as she went.

CHAPTER 2



Imitation of the Planet

1

The Imperial Senate. Known as the “Unseen Intent.”

Its chamber wasn’t marked on any Imperial maps, which played a big part in deciding its nickname, and its location was passed along only by word of mouth when absolutely necessary—never on paper.

Three miles underground, the ambient temperature often reached six hundred degrees Fahrenheit. The planet’s crust allowed microbes from the surface to just barely survive.

The place was accessible only by way of a special elevator located in the middle of a major base.

“There will be no change to our plans.”

“It’s not anything that you, a Saint Disciple of the fifth seat, should concern yourself over.”

“Prioritize the special mission.”

The Saint Disciple Risya gazed up at a wall where eight men and women were hazily displayed on glowing monitors. The Eight Great Apostles were the ones who truly controlled the Empire, though most people knew only of their names.

Nothing but the outlines of their faces were displayed on the monitors, and even their builds were indistinct.

Were they really human? Or intelligent machines pretending to be? Even representatives in the legislative assembly had publicly asked those questions.

“How unexpected,” drawled the Saint Disciple. She was nothing like those politicians. “I had the impression that you all were the ones most obsessed with the Successor of the Black Steel. After all, he is a swordsman who studied under *that man* .”

She received no response.

Silence from the Eight Great Apostles meant affirmation—a fact that no one in all the Empire knew, save Risya and a select handful.

“Iska was taken by the Ice Calamity Witch—and in a neutral city to boot. Even I was a little surprised when I received the news.”

According to Captain Mismis’s report about their encounter, there was a high possibility that he had been drugged.

“I mean, we call the Nebulis Sovereignty the vile den of monsters, but their mission statement is basically to keep the reputation of the astral mages from going south, right?”

“That’s precisely the case.”

“Off the battlefield, they pretend to be nothing more than mewling kittens.

“They do not show their teeth in front of civilians.”

“Yes, which is why I miscalculated.”

Risya had fully believed the mages wouldn’t conduct an attack within the neutral cities, only for this report to come flying in. The Successor of the Black Steel, Iska, had probably been under the same impression.

It had been inconceivable.

And by the time he had realized what was happening, he had collapsed from being poisoned.

“It’s *amazing*, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I’m sure it took a marvelous amount of prowess.”

“The witches have been feigning innocence all along to convince people they’re harmless in the neutral cities. This surprise attack was supremely effective on those who took them at face value.”

They had manipulated Iska’s belief that he understood what the witches were capable of.

Because no one had witnessed the “attack” in Ain, the Sovereignty would not be punished by any neutral cities.

It was a brilliant ploy.

Had Risya been at the scene, she would have personally commended them for their efforts.

“I doubt it was the act of a purebred. My guess is that it was done by someone close to them. The Ice Calamity Witch does have a gifted underling.”

After saying that much, the Saint Disciple pushed up the bridge of her glasses.

“Let’s get back to the subject at hand. About the kidnapped

boy.”

“Haven’t we already answered that question?”

Don’t ask the same thing twice seemed to be the intended message.

“You will prioritize the special mission.”

“Iska is that man’s successor. He will return using his own abilities. And if he can’t, then that is simply what the fate of the stars have decided for him.”

“Huh...,” offered Risya, unhurried. “That was what I had intended, too... But the Lord has put a halt on this.”

“Ngh.”

“What?”

The Holy Lord Yunmelngen.

The symbol of the united bulwark that was the Heavenly Empire. Their master.

Who exactly was the current Lord? How had the throne been passed down in the past? Not a single subject of the Empire understood the mechanisms behind it. The only ones who knew the identity of the supreme ruler were the Eight Great Apostles and Saint Disciples of a certain rank, Risya included.

Even among the former Saint Disciples, Iska, as the lowest-ranking member of them all, had never met the Lord in person.

“The Lord indicated that Iska possesses a military prowess that we should strive to keep on our side. If anything, the Lord is mostly concerned about the astral swords in his possession—and that we might lose a master able to wield them.”

“.....”

“How fickle.”

Their sighs came out in a cascade.

“Then, Risya, what would you do in this instance?”

“We assume you’ve brought several proposals along with you.”

“We know where he was taken.” Below her narrow glasses, the corners of her lips lifted. “The Nebulis Sovereignty’s thirteenth state, Alcatroz. Also known as ‘the prison block.’ A wonderful place.”

“Hmm. That would be...”

“...Where *that* Salinger the Transcendental is imprisoned.”

“A heretical sorcerer who bared his fangs at the previous queen of Nebulis. His astral power is extremely rare and

strong. If we're able to release him from his cell—"

Derisive laughter intermingled with the Eight Great Apostles' voices. They had instantly understood what it was Risya was plotting.

"Interesting. It will take work to win over Salinger, but there is value in trying."

"Circumstances permitting, this will pair nicely with the results of the special mission. The final outcome may even be favorable to us."

"Risya, do as you please."

"That's the plan." The Saint Disciple of the fifth seat answered as though it was a matter of fact. "This is going in the direction I had hoped for. Just as you wish, I will continue with the special mission. I think I will try recruiting the support of Unit 907."

She bowed politely.

The echo of military boots rang out as the Saint Disciple who served as the Lord's adviser left the assembly hall.

2

In the capital city of Yunmelngen, Sector Three was slowly falling under a dark veil as dusk arrived in the military district.

The setting sun blazed as it approached the horizon.

It wouldn't be long before the blue of the sky would run with stripes of black. The twinkle of the stars occasionally drew people's eyes above.

That was the scene beyond the window.

Turning to the incredibly thick and reinforced glass, Jhin discreetly breathed in.

"They had one up on us. Nobody would have been able to do any better if they were attacked in a neutral city."

A pair of swords had been placed on the meeting room table.

He turned to the black and white astral swords. The owner was absent, probably being taken far from the Empire deeper into the Sovereignty at that very moment.

"The neutral city forbids weapons of any kind, so Iska let them hold his swords. Even if I was to encounter and get attacked by the Ice Calamity Witch there, I would have raised a white flag."

"....."

“Plus, they poisoned him? Was it through an injection or the tiniest needle ever? What gets me is trying to figure out how in the world they did it. How were they able to poison Iska in a plaza where dozens of people were around?”

There hadn’t been a single independent witness.

If even one person had seen it happen, the whole attack would have been a terrible blunder. At any rate, if a witch had gone berserk in the neutral city, it would have given the Empire an excuse to spread that news all over the world.

The witches were truly devious. If they gave any reason for the league of neutral cities to see them as a threat, the Nebulis Sovereignty would instantly be isolated.

“They must have been supremely confident. I mean, they were dealing with Iska, after all. I can’t believe they would think they could get away with poisoning him without facing any retaliation.”

Even Jhin couldn’t imagine it had been simple.

To poison Iska without being noticed by the tourists in the plaza. Was there a way to do that?

“Hey, Nene?”

“Hmm, I can’t think of anything, either.” The girl with her ponytail sat across from him, slumped over and facedown on the table between them.

It seemed like her brain had stopped working from pure shock that Iska had been taken away.

“What if there was poison in his drink? No one would have noticed if he was just drinking something.”

“As if he’d do that. Even if someone from the Sovereignty handed one to him, he would obviously throw it right back at them... Well, whatever. It won’t do us any good to continue speculating about it.” He eyed their captain, who sat with her face partially turned away from them. “The Nebulis Sovereignty’s thirteenth state, Alcatroz. You’re sure about that?”

“...Y-yeah.”

“Then that’s where Iska’s been taken. We don’t know why the Ice Calamity Witch let that slip, but I bet she was crowing in victory and saying that there’s no use getting involved,” Jhin said.

But there was the chance that tiny slipup would become the opening they needed to land a decisive blow to the Sovereignty.

“...We’ll save him.” Mismis squeezed her left shoulder using her right hand, gritting her teeth. “We’re going to save Iska. Nene and

Jhin, please. Help me.”

“What else would we do?”

It didn’t surprise Jhin that she managed, through sheer will, to keep back her tears. She had a strong heart. Without it, she never would have been able to serve as a military captain. Jhin, Nene, and Iska never would have followed her into battle and beyond.

“It’s hard to say if we’re lucky, but there is a method of breaking through the Sovereign border that we can use. Working for the Eight Great Apostles is the last thing I want to do, but this way, we still have a chance of winning.”

“You mean the special mission, right, Jhin?”

“That’s right. Risya said it was possible.”

“There is a way to sneak into the Sovereignty even if you’re an Imperial citizen.”

“Just wait three more days, and you’ll see.”

Their orders were to capture the Nebulis queen by infiltrating the Sovereignty. The difficulty level wouldn’t change much even if they were to tack on a plan to rescue Iska.

“Capturing the queen is already an impossible and suicidal task. That won’t change even if we save Iska along the way. It’s not as though our success rate can get any lower than zero.”

“Hey, Jhin, you’re not being optimistic at all!”

“Who cares about chances of success? We’ve got a real reason to go now. That should be enough.”

They went from being unwilling to take part in the special mission to wanting to participate by any means possible.

“Or, Saint Disciple, is this whole situation just another part of your evil ploy?”

“No way,” came the response from beyond the door of the meeting room.

It was an indifferent and bright and feminine voice that called out from the other side of the metal portal, which had an automatic lock that she forcibly disarmed and opened.

“I wasn’t expecting this, either. It’s really something, huh? I think we should be praising the Sovereignty’s ingenious methods.”

“Yeah, I was just talking about that.”

Jhin’s gaze rested on Risya, who sauntered without a care to the

center of the room holding a pure-white metal box in her hands. She placed the weighty box on the table.

“Whew. Sorry for making you wait. Tough times, am I right?”

“Don’t act like it’s old history.”

“Oh, sorry. Right. You must have just gotten back, Mismis. I bet you came flying in the car at full speed and finally reached the capital in the middle of the night, right?”

“...”

Risya’s eyes turned to the captain.

Mismis remained immobile in her position at the table and lifted her face as though she was waking up when Risya said her name.

“Risya.”

“I knooow. Isk is a fellow Saint Disciple—well, a former one. Even if he wasn’t, there are still tons of missions I want him to go on.” The Saint Disciple of the fifth seat tapped on the whiteboard on the wall. “I’m going to summarize everything that’s happened so far, all right? During the day, Isk encountered the Ice Calamity Witch in Ain. Falling victim to a still unknown delivery method, he was poisoned and became incapacitated, after which he was taken outside the city. Of course, he was presumably transported to the Sovereignty. Isn’t that right, Mismis?”

“Ye...yeah. She said it was Alcatroz.”

“Far from the central state and commonly known as ‘the prison block.’ It’s the ideal place to keep Isk captive. It seems consistent with their motives. So about that—”

Risya grinned after observing the expressions on Jhin’s, Nene’s, and Mismis’s faces. They couldn’t tell what she was thinking from that smile.

“For better or worse, there is a way for all of you to safely cross the Sovereignty’s borders. *Right here.*”

She was talking about the white metal box on the table.

The box was big enough that Risya could just barely hold it, about the size of a cage for a small dog. Risya took off the four metal padlocks that had been attached to the top of the case as though she had undone it many times before.

“You better thank me. I rushed prepping this for Isk. I wasn’t planning on having it ready until the day after tomorrow. Okay, pay attention.”

Risya took off the lid.

White mist rushed up from the inside, like steam but fearfully cold.

“Ah?! I-it’s freezing...!”

“Oh, sorry, Nens. If we don’t keep it below negative fifty-eight degrees, *we can’t keep it contained.*”

There were black cylinders surrounded by the white smoke, just a little too thick and long for an adult’s hand to fully grasp. They were about the same shape as a thin flashlight—Risya took one out of the box and threw it.

“Here ya go, Jhin-Jhin.”

“...What’s this container? Is it an alloy?”

The cylindrical casing was cold.

When Jhin held it, the weight gave the impression that an incredibly strong metal had been used in its construction.

“As you know, it’s difficult for someone who is not an astral mage to step foot in the Nebulis Sovereignty. That’s because you need to show identification and undergo the astral trial.”

Any identification they planned to use had to be sourced from someplace other than the Empire.

If they were subjected to the astral trial, they would be checked for the universal sign of a mage, the astral crest.

In the past, the Imperial army had attempted the former. In other words, they had forged documents, trying to sneak in with identification papers that matched those issued by neutral cities.

“Well, we don’t have to talk about the past, right? The Imperial military has been trying to infiltrate the Sovereignty for the last century, and every time, they were basically found out immediately, but...” Risya grabbed a black cylindrical container herself.

“This time, I think it’ll work.”

She wrenched open the cap of the cylinder.

Bsht. The connector seemed to break...

...and brilliant particles of light gushed out of the container.

It appeared to be a geyser. The particles of light rushed out, blasting all the way up to the ceiling of the meeting room.

“Is this astral energy?!”

“You’re right on the money, Jhin-Jhin. These are the fruits of

the labors of the researchers at Omen.”

Omen was an exclusive collective of geniuses. In the Imperial territories, where research into astral energy was strictly forbidden, they were the sole organization with clearance to do so.

“...Was this at the suggestion of the top of the Empire?” Gripping the black cylinder hard, Jhin let out a sigh. “This is unthinkable. Who would have thought the Imperial soldiers would have gotten this far in researching astral energy?”

Headquarters.

The Saint Disciples.

The Eight Great Apostles.

The most powerful authorities of the largest nation in the world had unmistakably continued this behind the scenes for decades.

“Nene, seems like we’re going to be their guinea pigs.”

“Huh? Jhin, what do you mean?”

“*This.*” Without asking for consent, Risya snatched Nene’s left wrist, pushing the end of the cylinder into it like a multi-needle syringe, injecting her with astral energy.

“Hey?! H-how could you, Risya?!”

“It’ll be fiiine. It didn’t hurt, right? It’ll be over before you know it. Just be patient. If you can get through this without shedding a single tear, I’ll treat you to some juice later,” the Saint Disciple joked, though her eyes reflected none of the mirth her words implied.

Risya ignored the cries coming from Nene, who was now on high alert. The Saint Disciple maintained a tight grip on the young girl’s wrist as she stabbed Nene’s palm with another injection.

“Nene?! Please, Risya! What are you doing to my subordinates?!”

“Hmm, see for yourself.”

About twenty seconds had passed.

When she finally released Nene’s wrist, the light of the astral energy had disappeared from the black cylinder.

It was as if the battery of a flashlight had run out.

“How do you feel, Nens?”

“.....” No reply from the girl with the ponytail.

She was at a loss for words, gazing at the *red astral crest that had appeared on her palm*.

“...Am I a witch now?”

“It only affects the skin on your hand.” Risya tossed the empty

container back into the box. “Oh, and also, it’ll only last a week.”

“What?”

“Well, think of it this way. When you get a tan at the beach, your skin naturally goes back to its natural color over time, just like that. This thing basically gives you a concentrated shot of astral energy to form an astral crest at the skin level.”

The astral mark had appeared on the back of Nene’s hand, though on closer inspection, its color was fainter than a real one.

“So it’s all make-believe to pass through their astral trial?” Jhin clarified.

“Right on the money. All right, Nens, you give him a crest next.”

“Um... Uhhh.”

“Wait, Nene. Superiors first. I’ll give one to the boss.” He stopped her and clutched the black syringe that held light, moving toward Captain Mismis’s side. “Hey, Lord Saint Disciple, does it matter where she has it?”

“Nope, even hands and feet are good to go. But make sure to put it in a place that isn’t super noticeable.”

This was an Imperial military facility. If anyone saw a person with a crest, it would throw the place into chaos.

“You heard her, boss. If it can go anywhere, your left arm will do. Lift your sleeve and show me your shoulder.”

“...What? Uh, um, Jhin.”

“I’ll say it again. Give me your left shoulder.” To keep the Saint Disciple from seeing, he used his back as a shield.

Mismis hesitatingly rolled up her sleeve to reveal her upper arm, sneakily taking off the medical tape that covered it.

There was her emerald astral crest. Jhin pushed the syringe on top of it.

“How’s this, Lord Saint Disciple?”

“Let me see. Hmm, looks good. Interesting—brighter than Nens’s. Almost like the real deal.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha? N-no way, Risya... Uh, look, it’s because my skin is so sensitive. Like, I get sunburned right away, too.” Mismis rushed to cover her left shoulder from Risya’s prying gaze, hiding her genuine crest from view.

I see. Good job, Jhin! Nene seemed to say with glittering eyes.

Obviously, Jhin wordlessly responded.

It would take a week for the artificial astral crest to disappear.

At least for the period of the special mission, Captain Mismis wouldn't have to worry about arousing any suspicion.

That was more than enough time for them to rescue Iska.

"Hey, Nene."

"Uh, yeah, Jhin? Where do you want yours? On your forehead? Your cheek? Or your hand?"

"Somewhere other than my hands. The worst thing that could happen is some unexpected complication taking my hands out of commission. If I can't use them, I can't shoot my gun. Do it on my leg."

He offered up his right ankle.

It was said that actual witches and sorcerers could have their astral crest appear anywhere. There were reports of stronger astral power causing larger crests. The one on Mismis's shoulder was all-around larger than Jhin's and Nene's artificial marks.

"With this, you're all set to cross the Sovereign border." Risya collected the now-empty canisters.

They needed to be reloaded for reuse. She placed them back in the refrigerated box and firmly closed the lid.

"Twelve units. Fifty-one soldiers who have received the same procedure."

"Including the other elite units?"

"Right, right. And this time around, the top dogs of the Empire want intel on the Sovereignty's borders. There are twelve units, and you'll all go through separate checkpoints."

"...So this is nothing more than an experiment." Jhin understood it now.

It was a special mission in name only. To the big shots, this was purely to collect data.

"The Nebulis Sovereignty is a commonwealth of nations made up of thirteen states. Twelve dependent states joined the Nebulis Sovereignty to make it what it is now."

"Right. And Isk was taken to the thirteenth state, Alcatroz," Risya added.

"We're going to try infiltrating the Sovereignty from that checkpoint in Alcatroz. Is that right?"

And the other eleven units would be as well.

The twelve states surrounded the central state. They would be attempting to slip past all of those borders.

But how many guards would be protecting those borders?

And with how many surveillance devices?

They would be the ones confirming every one of those details.

“The endgame must be to figure out the best checkpoint to target. That’s what the special mission is actually about—data. If we know which checkpoint is easiest to invade, then we can dispatch elite units next time. I bet it’ll be ten times larger than this operation.”

“Right. Jhin-Jhin, you’re quick to pick up.”

They were sacrifices in the greater experiment. That was the message. The Saint Disciple of the fifth seat plainly admitted it as well.

Taken to the extreme, the mission would be considered a success if a single one of the twelve units could infiltrate the Sovereignty. And if the other eleven units were caught at the border? That wouldn’t be a problem. After all, it meant they would know that checkpoint was dangerous.

“You sure are blunt.”

“You’re so sharp, Jhin-Jhin. Plus, I know Unit 907 will give it their best shot, regardless of my answer.” Risya winked, dexterously batting her eyes. “Basically, the Empire is trying to gather data on whether these artificial crests work and whether you can actually get into the Sovereignty in this disguise. That’s their goal. If you’re able to get across the border safely, then consider the mission as good as ninety percent successful.”

“What about the plan to capture the queen of Nebulis?”

“We’ll have you put that into action, of course. If you’ve gone to the trouble of getting into the Sovereignty, we might as well have you attack the palace. But—”

A pause.

The bespectacled Saint Disciple looked around at the three surrounding her.

“If twelve units were to all try infiltrating the royal palace, you’d accomplish nothing but standing out. What would happen if over fifty unfamiliar people were to visit the same castle out of nowhere? It’d be suspicious, astral crest or not.”

“Of course.”

“That’s why the Eight Great Apostles have sympathized with us. Right, Mismis?”

“Y-yeah?!” Clutching her left shoulder, the captain righted herself in a fluster.

“After you break through the Nebulis Sovereignty border, go to ground in Alcatroz and find Isk. And if you find him...”

“Yeah?”

“Make a big scene.” Risya smiled—her amusement was palpable. “You’ll cause a huge commotion in Alcatroz. Half of the other eleven units will raise hell separately in the other states—that should be enough to put the palace in a tough spot.”

“I see! While we’re making a scene and the central state is shaken up—”

“You guessed it. The rest of the units will raid the royal palace. Look how smart you’ve become, Mismis.” Risya winked again.

They would get their chance to infiltrate the Sovereignty and mount a rescue to save Iska. That had unexpectedly tied into accomplishing their special mission.

Upon that revelation, Mismis adopted a tense expression.

“You look pleased, Mismis. I’m busy with prep, so I’m going to run along now. All of you just need to do your best. I’m expecting good things from your Sovereign border breakthrough.”

Risya picked up the metal box she’d brought with her.

“See ya. Next time, we’ll meet on the field.”

Before anyone could ask what she meant by that, the Saint Disciple slipped out of the room.

CHAPTER 3



Just Can't Get Away

1

The twins of Nebulis.

The Founder was the older of the two, possessing the greatest, strongest astral power in existence. She was called the Grand Witch by the Empire, the one who stood alone against invasions by Imperial soldiers—until the end of her days.

The younger of the twins was the one who started the Sovereignty.

Later known as Nebulis I, she had hastened the expansion of the country to combat the monolithic, militant nation known as the Empire.

It was under this policy that the twelve subject states joined their cause.

The original Sovereign territory that the Empire came to fear as the “Paradise of Witches” became the central state of the new thirteen-state union.



Within the Nebulis Sovereignty lay the thirteenth state, Alcatroz.

Buildings made of steel lined the roads, their design largely dictated by the ruthless attempts of Imperial soldiers who tried to invade the city in the past. This region was home to clusters of architecture that could withstand Imperial artillery bombardment.

The cold concrete walls were sterile, and if she was to describe it succinctly, Alice imagined the scenery could have been lifted straight from the streets of the Empire.

...Even though it's in the Sovereignty.

...What a weird comparison to make.

Alice couldn't help but think about it.

"Hey, Rin, I think this state needs to be redeveloped from corner to corner. We should widen the roads and plant some trees and make this a place where people can see the blue sky from the roads."

"You're right, Lady Alice; however..." Rin was driving their vehicle, which rumbled through the streets. "We need a budget and time frame. If the Imperial army was to push in while we were in the middle of development efforts, we would not stand a chance."

"That's the source of our problems..."

Alice had a mountain of things on her to-do list for when she became queen. The issue was that 90 percent of those items required that she defeat the Empire first.

...Overthrowing the Empire.

...If that were easy, things would be so simple.

She was in the back seat, gazing at the boy curled up and sleeping beside her.

It was the former Saint Disciple Iska. Even if he woke up, he wouldn't be able to move a finger for some time due to the side effects of the sedative. But just to be cautious, they had put him in handcuffs.

"Weren't you...?" She looked intently down at his slumbering profile. "Weren't you the one who stood up to all my astral attacks when we fought?" It was a bit late for her to feel this way, but Alice still found the series of events that led to this point hard to believe as she gazed at the boy who had let himself be easily kidnapped.

This was the swordsman who had torn through her astral power and was capable of confronting the Founder Nebulis's attacks.

"Hey, what am I supposed to do with you?" Alice hadn't wanted him to succumb to poison in the neutral city. This wasn't the way she wanted to settle things.

But the relations between the two countries prevented her from just letting Iska go without any conditions. Even Alice didn't have that kind of sympathy for an enemy soldier.

...I had no option except to capture you.

...Because we were seen.

Because they had been seen by the Imperial captain Mismis, she had no choice but to take him.

But how would she deal with him now?

“With a soldier like you, we’d need to set a high ransom or negotiate for resource concessions.”

“Lady Alice?”

“...Don’t worry about it.”

The attendant behind the wheel had been the one to propose imprisoning Iska. Considering he was a natural menace as a former Saint Disciple, it was an appropriate decision. On the other hand, Alice had reservations about unconditionally releasing him. Still, she found it hard to simply accept the way they had done things.

While it was true they had taken him captive, she really didn’t want to treat him roughly.

“Rin, this is a very crowded road. Make sure you keep your eyes to the front.”

“Of course.” The attendant’s gaze turned forward.

In that moment, Alice inched closer to Iska.

She remembered seeing his sleeping expression in the neutral city. During that time, Iska had been sound asleep, completely off his guard to the point that she had almost lowered *her* guard.

He was innocent, young, and friendly, a completely different person compared to when he wielded his swords on the battlefield. It wasn’t his face but the bearing of his body that made him seem at odds with himself. How would she describe it? It was like he was just inviting her to mess with him. That was the impression she got.

“...He’s not going to wake up, is he?” With her fingers, Alice tried poking his shoulder. She could feel the corded muscles under his clothes. She could tell he was more muscular than she had imagined.

“Oh, wow. I suppose that’s a boy for you.”

This was *fun*.

His body was different from hers or Rin’s. His muscles were firm, springing back when she stopped pressing down.

It was a strange feeling for Alice.

What else...?

What would his cheek feel like?

“Ha!” She prodded at his cheek with her finger.

It was soft but firmer than hers. It was a marvel to her.

“...Mine are softer.” She touched her own cheek.

Yup. Her cheek was softer, though by a truly negligible amount.



“Hmm, I suppose I win.”

Winning at what? She couldn't say, even though she had been the one to bring it up. This sensation she felt was...

...

.....

This was *incredibly fun*.

Though she still felt guilty for whisking Iska all the way out here, touching him while he was asleep was so entertaining, it drove every other thought away. She just couldn't help it.

It was a slight interest in the opposite sex—and a bit of mischievousness on her part, too. If she had to be specific, it was almost as if this helped ease her tension—like stroking a kitten.

“...This is scary. You're supposed to be my enemy. I almost feel like I'm about to forget that.”

But she just couldn't stop touching him.

After she thoroughly checked his cheeks, she patted his hair. *Come to think of it, how many years has it been since I've touched hair this short? It must be easy to wash, too.*

She was certain this boy wouldn't know the time and effort that went into cleaning and maintaining long hair.

“...But you might look good if you grew it out, you know?” She combed her fingers through his bangs. His hair flowed between her fingers as though she was petting the coat of a cat.

“Ah, a cat!”

“What?” Alice's hand froze in place.

Had she said her thought out loud? Rin had let out a shriek, stomping on the brakes and stopping the car in its tracks.

“Ah?! What are you doing, Rin?!”

“It's a stray cat. It suddenly jumped into the road... Oh, thank goodness. Looks like I hit the brakes in time. Lady Alice, I assume you're not hurt?”

“In times like these, you're supposed to say, ‘Are you okay?’”

Though, of course, it was obvious she hadn't been injured in any way, since they still had the presence of mind to banter. They were lucky the car hadn't been going that fast.

“But be careful. I hit my butt and... Uh. What?” There was a strange sensation on her rear that she fearfully lifted herself off.

And there was Iska's face.

“Ahhh?! S-sorry! I sat on it with my butt!”

“Lady Alice?”

“I-it’s nothing, Rin. You just keep your eyes on the road and drive!”

She put her hand on Iska’s face, which looked to the side.

Though he was an enemy, pinning a gentleman under her bottom was entirely improper and, above all else, obviously embarrassing for the princess of a country.

“H-he’s not awake, right...?”

“...” He blinked.

Right as she was watching closely, the Imperial swordsman slowly opened his eyes.

...Where is this place?

...It’s not Ain. What are these restraints...?

When did this all happen?

Throughout the extended period that he’d barely hung on to his consciousness, Iska knew he was riding something while on his side this whole time. He heard girls’ voices. Though it was intermittent, he could tell someone was talking.

“Ah, a cat!”

“What? Ah?! What are you doing, Rin?!”

Someone slammed on the brakes, and he heard car horns. And the biggest surprise was someone crushing his face with their butt, which drove away the last of the drowsiness that the sedative had brought on.

“.....Ugh...” He opened his eyes.

He was on his side on the wide seat, and there was Alice, looking down at him in shock. That was what he immediately understood.

“...Uh...”

“You were awake?!” Alice retreated to the corner of the seat in his hazy vision. “Wait, Rin! This isn’t what you promised. You said he would wake up tomorrow at the earliest and that it would take another day for him to be able to move after that!”

“That’s impossible?! This is no joking matter. Does he have a supernatural resistance to drugs...?!” Rin’s face peeked in from the front.

Only Alice and Rin were in the car.

...What’s going on here? Where is Captain Mismis?

...I...was supposed to be in the neutral city with her.

He had reunited with Alice.

He remembered up until that point, but why was it that he had completely lost his memories of anything after that? No, wait. Remember.

“...Here.”

“For you. Think of it as an act of generosity from Lady Alice.”

He had received a can of juice from Rin.

Then that was when he'd lost consciousness. He was in a car with the two from the Sovereignty, taken along on unfamiliar streets, which meant...

“Ah!”

“I-it seems he's up to speed...” The one who responded, sounding strangely unenthusiastic, was Alice. “Y-you're ours now. It's your own fault for drinking drugged juice.”

“...Oh, geez.”

A normal person would have been scared or in despair upon the realization that they'd been taken prisoner. At the very least, they wouldn't put their captor in a bad mood. But even though he knew those were the rules of being held captive, Iska couldn't help opening his mouth reflexively.

“Alice.”

“Wh-what?”

“I'm disappointed in you. I didn't think the Sovereign princess would do this deplorable act...”

“I-it's not what you think! I didn't want this!” Alice whacked the seats as she yelled. Her face turned bright red. “I didn't mean for this to happen at all! Rin did it on her own without me!”

“Wait, Lady Alice! This wasn't what I expected to happen, either!” This time, Rin yelled from the driver's seat. “If anything, it's your fault, Imperial swordsman! You never should have fallen for something so obvious! You've only got yourself to blame for getting captured. Your own inattentiveness sealed your fate.”

“Whoever spiked the drink is obviously the one to blame!”

But he couldn't refute the second part of her statement.

He had been naive.

The neutral city banned all use of force or foreign interference. Though he couldn't fathom the repercussions of breaking those laws

in the neutral city, there were naturally going to be exceptions—like if the perpetrators weren't caught.

In that sense, using sedatives was the ideal method. And to start, who would drink something offered by an enemy under normal circumstances?

"Y-you understand your position, right?" Alice chimed in again as though it was hard for her to say that. She must have been feeling guilty, seeing as how she kept averting her eyes.

"...We're here." Rin broke the silence with her dutiful report.

The car came to a halt.

Though Iska was still without his full range of movement, he managed to twist about enough to gaze out the window, and he caught a glimpse of a gigantic building emitting light.

"Lady Alice, you'll be staying in a suite on the top floor of this hotel. And you, Imperial swordsman..." Rin opened the back door, casting a cold gaze as she stood there in her usual housekeeping clothes. "We're going to bring you into the hotel. Don't yell just because you can. We are inside the country of Nebulis. You won't find so much as a single ally."

"..."

"Come. You are Lady Alice's prisoner," the attendant spat at the silent boy. "We could even say you're Lady Alice's dog. Don't forget that."

"A-a dog?! Iska...as my pet? I—I can't have that, Rin. How am I supposed to react when you say stuff like that?!"

"Lady Alice, please. You're making it harder to unnerve him!" Rin sighed. "Anyway, we're heading up. Stand, Imperial swordsman. You can walk by now, right?"

2

The thirteenth state, Alcatroz.

Fifty years in the past, the independent nation of Alcatroz had withstood the military pressure of the Empire and sought to become a subordinate state of the Sovereignty. Not long after, it was reborn as a member of the enormous commonwealth of nations under the Sovereignty's sphere of influence.

The Nebulis Sovereignty dispatched both labor and talent to its newest satellite.

Furthermore, the authorities here allowed the union of regular humans and astral mages.

Before becoming a subordinate state, the ratio of astral mages in Alcatraz hovered around 6 percent, which jumped up to 11 after they joined hands with the Sovereignty. In other words, one out of every ten people was a witch or sorcerer.

...It seems those with strong astral power have started to appear among them.

...They're increasing in number and some are on par with the purebreds in terms of power.

That was what Iska knew about the thirteenth state—meaning that was all he knew.

More to the point, he didn't know where *here* was. He was certain no other Imperial soldiers knew there was a luxury hotel that catered to the royal family in this place.

"Where are we...?" muttered Iska automatically after being brought into the presidential suite.

The living room alone was ten times larger than his own room.

They were currently on the top floor of the hotel.

The wall was entirely made of glass and offered a commanding view of the steel buildings around them. There was a dining table that could comfortably seat eight people, a piano, and even a pool table. Everything was just on an entirely different level from Iska's room.

"Ah, I'm tired. This is the first time I've been so tense riding in a car." Alice sat down on the soft sofa.

She didn't seem at all surprised by the extravagant decor. It was almost as though she was used to it.

"Lady Alice, are you really okay with this?"

"What's wrong, Rin?"

"Are you really fine with bringing this swordsman here? I've made a reservation for a room in lieu of a detention area. We could simply lock him up in there..."

"We can't." Alice righted herself on the sofa. "It's the smallest room in the hotel, right? I don't want rumors spreading that the princess mistreated him. Plus, we've already found ourselves in a peculiar situation, just by virtue of bringing him here. Until we decide what to do with him, we need to treat him suitably."

"Y-yes, but...!" The attendant pointed plainly at Iska standing next to her, indicating the steel handcuffs that bound his wrists.

"This swordsman is dangerous. He's somehow conscious even after getting a dose of my sedative—and well enough to walk, at that... We have no idea when he might attack you, Lady Alice."

"Even without a sword?"

"Even without a sword. I can imagine him attacking you as you sleep, Lady Alice. A man, without exception, is a beast."

"What are you talking about?!" yelled Alice.

"What're you trying to say?!" screamed Iska.

Facing the two, Rin sighed, looking discontent with a feeble expression. "...Understood. There is still a need to keep watch over him. We cannot allow him to be in the same room as you, Lady Alice. This will be my room. Please use the neighboring presidential suite. We've reserved the whole floor anyway."

"You're keeping watch over him, Rin?"

"Yes. There is time until dinner. You should rest for a while."

"I understand. Rin, take care to be polite to him." After glancing at Iska once, the princess turned on her heel with a graceful flourish. She passed through the living room, which was large enough to be a banquet hall, and sauntered through the hotel hallway.

"...Now, then." Rin locked the door that Alice had exited. After letting out a huge breath, she spoke without constraint. "I haven't faced you like this since we met in those woods. Was it the Nelka forest?"

"...Seems that way."

"I'm aware of the threat you posed at that time—to a painful degree and far more so than Lady Alice. Think of it that way."

Just as her words implied, her eyes were devoid of friendliness, unlike Alice's.

"I'm the attendant and guard of Lady Alice. It's only natural for me to be familiar with hand-to-hand combat."

When one considered her duty as a royal family member's bodyguard, her hostility had to be more overt than her lady's.

"And now that that's over with..."

Iska didn't have time to stop her.

There were fruits and a paring knife left on the table. Taking up the latter, the girl cut her palm, streaking it with a line of blood.

“Wha—?! Uh...what are you doing?!”

“Don’t worry about it.” Rin grinned.

It was the first smile she’d directed at him. However, he immediately realized that even though her mouth was turned up in a smile, her eyes were filled with murderous rage.

“I’m just creating pretext. I need this to be a case of self-defense.”

“Excuse me?”

“You noticed the knife on the table and used it to assault me. But as the commendable guard of Lady Alice, I managed to evade your vile attack, barely, and I successfully overpowered you, injuring my hand along the way—and scene.”

Iska was still feeling the effects of the sedative, so he had trouble moving like usual. More importantly, his hands were bound in handcuffs, which rendered him pretty much powerless.

“It was my instinct the first time I came across you.” Gripping the paring knife, Rin swayed as she took a step, eyes blazing. “That this Imperial swordsman would become the biggest threat to Lady Alice’s goal of world unification in the future. Because of that, I have hardened my resolve. Even if Lady Alice doesn’t understand this right now, I’m sure she’ll praise my actions far in the future!”

“...You wouldn’t.”

“Imperial swordsman, prepare yourself!” The girl brought up the knife. “You will be the foundation for Lady Alice’s future—a sacrifice to unite the world. Don’t you desperately long for world peace?!”

“This isn’t what I want at all!”

“I won’t kill you. But you won’t be able to stand on the battlefield any longer.”

“You’ve got to be kidding?!”

“As if! I shall strike you down!”

Faced with this young woman, who was a bodyguard and a first-class assassin, brandishing a blade right in front of him, Iska’s whole body broke out in a sweat.



Hotel Gregorio.

She was walking through its halls on the top floor.

“Oh no. I don’t mind taking a break for a while, but I was just about to forget something important.” Alice suddenly stopped and turned around. “Iska’s dinner. Rin and I can’t just eat by ourselves... I don’t know how things will turn out, but we can’t give him the cold shoulder even if he’s our captive.”

She would explain it to Rin.

They would have three dinners brought to the presidential suite. She needed to make sure they prepared the same menu for him.

“Yeah, cold pasta salad is good, too. If they have sweet tomatoes at the market, I’ve just got to make it.”

“Right? Cold pasta with tomatoes is so delicious. I like it, too!”

She naturally recalled that exchange.

“...Maybe we’ll have cold tomato pasta today.”

Would Iska be happy? Or surprised? He might suspect it of being poisoned again.

“Ha-ha, I wonder if I could give him a good scare. That might be cute.”

What could she do? Just imagining his expression softened hers for some reason.

“Oh no... I can’t be doing this. Rin would get mad at me if she saw me right now. Iska is our captive, after all. I can’t think too fondly of him.”

She unlocked the door with her spare key, opening the room where Rin was keeping watch over Iska. Alice opened her mouth to speak.

“Hey, Rin, come to think of it, I forgot something important. About dinner today_____ Rin?”

She froze in place, doorknob still in one hand. In the corner of the living room, Alice saw Iska and Rin entangled together on the large sofa.

“Gah... Why, you! I can’t believe you managed to stop my knife in handcuffs!”

“Like I’d let you do me in that easily!”

“Tch! You just don’t know when to give up. Just accept your fate and become the cornerstone for world peace!”

“Don’t be unreasonable!”

Rin had clearly tried to stab him with the knife, and Iska barely

stopped her even while his hands were still bound. Both of their faces were bright red, and they were giving their all in their battle.

“A-Alice?!” Iska turned when he heard her footsteps. “Look, your mistress is back! Put away your knife already!”

“Ha! Don’t be stupid. Lady Alice should be heading to her room right about now.”

On the other hand, Rin was too frantic about pinning Iska down to notice. She wouldn’t even turn around to follow his pointed gaze.

“I would never be fooled that easily.”

“I’m telling the truth!”

“Hmph, if Lady Alice is here, why isn’t she stopping us?”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking of doing.”

“What?”

Alice was right behind Rin, touching her shoulder as the attendant’s voice shot up an octave. Alice spoke gently. “That looks like *so much fun*. Would you let me join in?”

“...Lady Alice?!” The girl with brown hair whipped around with a start. While Rin had her guard down, Alice wrested the knife from her hand.

“Iska is my prisoner. What kind of attendant would dare to lay a hand on their master’s belongings?” She glared at Rin with cold eyes.

Even if they were close, Alice and Rin would always be in a master-servant relationship. Needless to say, those who went against their master’s wishes would receive punishment.

“Rin.”

“Y-yes.”

“This is the second strike. Make sure there isn’t a third. If you break that promise...”

“...If I do?”

“One month. Every day, I’m going to make you eat strawberry cake with tons of whipped cream for all three meals. Morning, afternoon, and night. Just cake packed with calories. A month of that, and I won’t even want to *look* at you.”

“Nooooo oooooooo !”

“This is entirely your fault for acting on your own.” Alice firmly crossed her arms as she looked down on her sobbing attendant.

“...Lady Alice, it’s ready.” Rin brought out a beautifully ornamented chain. “This isn’t what I personally want, but if you insist, Lady Alice, it cannot be helped.”

“It’s because you tried to take matters into your own hands, twice.”

“...Yes.” Rin linked the chain to Iska’s handcuffs. “You understand, Imperial swordsman? You’re under Lady Alice’s supervision from now on.”

“I think that was the case from the start...”

Though what Rin probably meant was that he would physically be under Alice’s care this time.

For Iska was restrained with the handcuffs—connected to the new chain that wrapped around Alice’s wrist as a bracelet. The two of them were connected by that chain, unable to go more than three yards apart at any given time.

“I suppose this will do. It’d be dangerous to leave you with Rin. I’ll watch you personally from now on. Think of it as a privilege.”

“...I see.” His handcuffs were connected to Alice’s bracelet by the chain, meaning he had no choice but to be by her side. But Iska was just relieved he was no longer under Rin’s watch.

“Are we going to be like this the whole time?”

“Of course. Rin said it’d be careless to keep you only in handcuffs.” Alice held up the bracelet on her right wrist. “As long as you’re connected to me by this chain, you can’t do anything foolish. And Rin will protect the key. Now you’re under my watch!”

Why did the princess seem jubilant at the prospect?

“Ha-ha, this could be fun from time to time. To have a powerful fighter from an enemy country attached to you. It’s kind of exhilarating.”

“Is this some kind of unhealthy hobby of yours?”

“O-of course not! I just...want to keep a close eye on you. Prepare yourself. Because you’re going to be under my supervision for the rest of today.” Her face flushed red.

In spite of her words, Iska started to think of a small issue at the back of his mind.

“So, Alice, can I ask you something really weird?”

“What would that be? I’ll have you know that I won’t be taking off those handcuffs. Until the Empire broaches the subject of your release, you’re my—”

“Since we’re connected by this chain and all...” *Jingle.* He

touched it. "...What're we gonna do about the bathroom?"

"What?"

"...Well, because look..."

Even if they were in a private bathroom, the chain that connected the two wouldn't let them close the door. And to take it one step further, bathing posed a similar problem. If they were connected, Iska would always be by Alice's side regardless of what was happening.

"What about baths? And when we're sleeping?"

"..." Silence. Her face turned redder and redder. "This is horrible!"

"So it hadn't crossed your mind at all..."

"Why didn't you mention that earlier?! Ha! Has this been what you've been after from the start? Who knew you lacked even the slightest bit of shame!"

"Anyone would realize it after putting some thought into it!"

It wasn't as though he had wanted to bring it up. Why should a prisoner have to consider their capturer's bathing and bathroom needs?

"And—" Alice suddenly stopped moving. Her eyes went wide as though in revelation, and she started to squirm.

"Alice?"

".....Uh.....well..."

"Yeah?"

".....B-because you brought all that up..." Her voice trailed off, vanishing at the end.

The Sovereign princess looked as though she was about to cry.

"...Now that you mention it, I haven't gone to the bathroom this whole time...and....."

"You don't mean you have to—?"

"Not another word!" The princess slid up to him, voice cracking. "You need to have more delicacy. You understand? Girls don't use the bathroom. We only go there to fix our makeup!"

"Then there's no need to be embarrassed!"

"Rin, this is an emergency! Take off the chain with the key immediately! ...Uh, Rin?"

"Didn't she just leave? She said she needed to tell the chef to make three meals for dinner."

"Rin, you idiot!"

Hurry and come back. Alice's woeful wail echoed through the top

floor of the hotel.

3

The great Saint Elzaria River flowed down from the perennially snow-capped mountains, snaking through an expansive plateau that eventually led to the ocean. It was a world-renowned river of prominence that was 2,500 miles long in total.

A natural border.

The land of the Nebulis Sovereignty started on the other bank beyond this muddy waterway.

“The Grand Goal Iron Bridge. A suspension bridge that leads to the other bank and serves as a checkpoint,” noted the driver of the compact car.

Propping his head up with his hand against the window frame, Jhin glanced at the muddy waters flowing under the bridge.

It was ten in the evening. The flowing river was darkened by the shadows of night, hidden from sight. It was just barely visible where the streetlights lit the road.

“Trying to cross by swimming this stupid river would be as good as suicide. You can’t get into the Sovereignty without going through the bridge checkpoint...I guess.”

In the past, many of the espionage units the Empire had dispatched had failed at this border checkpoint—at the astral trial.

The checkpoint standards of the Nebulis Sovereignty changed drastically based on whether a person had an astral crest.

“Our country, the Sovereignty, welcomes all those on this planet who are astral mages.”

“All those born in our country and those astral mages born in the neutral cities are equal.”

The Empire had attempted to capture all those who had astral crests.

Due to its national policy to protect their kindred, the screening for entrance was traditionally soft when it came to the immigration of those with astral crests.

“...I guess this was a success, at least.”

Jhin meant his right ankle. Though it was currently hidden under his shoe, he sported an artificial astral crest just on the surface of his skin. It had let him slip right through the astral trial.

“The visual inspection and astral-energy check were over for me in five minutes, but...they’re late—where is the boss and Nene?”

The mark could emerge anywhere on the body. Depending on the person, it could be on a part of the body that was difficult for others to spot, so there were cases where people would need to take off their clothes. Were their inspections running long because of that?

“They couldn’t have been caught, right?”

Jhin had managed to pass through with identification from a neutral city.

For clothes, he had come in casual pants and a jacket rather than his combat uniform. And his beloved sniper rifle had been disguised as a hunting gun that a normal person could own.

There had been nothing to make anyone suspect he was an Imperial soldier.

It should have been the same for Captain Mismis and Nene.

“Sorry for the wait, Jhin!” shouted Mismis.

“Oh, you’re already here! Aren’t you early?”

Two charming voices called out to him.

A pair of girls in casual wear were running to him from the front of the parked car.

“Jhin, how was it for you?” asked the captain.

“Nothin’ happened. They wouldn’t just let me hang around in the car if I’d been caught.”

“...Oh, I’m so relieved. I’m glad you were fine.” Captain Mismis put a hand on her chest and breathed out as though she was releasing all her tension.

She wore a jacket over her dress.

When she was in her combat uniform, she gave off a more straitlaced and mature impression, but now she seemed like she was in her teens. Her hair was usually tied up and appeared short at first glance, but when it was down like she had it currently, she seemed even more free-spirited than usual.

“You two sure as hell took a while.”

“Ummm. We got caught up in a check for our certificate of residency,” explained Nene, who was in a thin camisole and skinny jeans, which apparently allowed her to move around with ease.

“The inspector had their eyes on Captain for misrepresentation of age.”

“Oh, that’s what she wants you to think.”

“I do not! I’m telling you: Twenty-two is young, Jhin. I’m a woman in her prime!” Her cheeks puffed up as she pouted.

The captain was genuinely twenty-two years old, except she got into movie theaters with children’s admission prices. She had to be aware that she presented young.

“So we all got through? We can go past the checkpoint now, right...?” Taking a few glances at their surroundings, Captain Mismis climbed into the back seat.

The last of the people applying for entry that day were around them. Most were tourists and merchants from the neutral cities—not astral mages. Those without crests were probably undergoing a grueling background check.

“Hey, Jhin, did they have astral mage corps where you were?”

“Not many. I’m guessing that as a major power with a legacy to uphold, they don’t want to seem on edge, even when their war with the Empire is at full throttle.”

They could see a handful of members from the astral mage corps on the bridge in their uniforms, which made them easy to pick out.

“I bet there are some mixed in with the travelers—in disguise. Keep your guard up, boss. If you’re careless and talk to someone thinking they’re a traveler, they might end up being an astral mage corps member. And that’s no joke.”

“E-even I know that!” Captain Mismis was in the back seat and Nene in shotgun.

The small car carried the three of them across the bridge. There was a line indicating the border on the roadway; the moment they went over it, they would be in the Sovereignty’s domain.

“...We’re in! We did it; we really did it! We got past the border, didn’t we?” Captain Mismis cheered quietly. “Now we’ve accomplished the first step of the mission. When I first heard Risya talk about this, I thought we were goners for sure.”

“This is only the beginning. You can’t relax yet, boss.”

They caught sight of the scene on the metal bridge ahead of them from the front window: a cluster of gray buildings. This was the thirteenth state in the Nebulis Sovereignty—Alcatroz. Information the Imperial military had beyond this point was

limited.

“Iska was taken yesterday around noon, right?”

“Y-yeah!”

“Which would mean the Ice Calamity Witch came here sometime earlier today. We got here in the middle of the night. That leaves us with a half-day gap.”

There was a ten-hour difference in their pursuit.

It took about a full day to reach the Sovereign border from the neutral city of Ain by car. How had Unit 907 managed to get there so fast?

With Risyā’s help, they had chartered an Imperial military airlift, flying to the neutral city closest to the border and then switching to a high-speed car. There was no mistake that it was the quickest method of pursuit that a single unit could achieve.

“They’ve probably reached the center of Alcatroz by now. I wonder where they’ve taken him.”

There were many places where a single person could be confined. How would they search this sprawling state?

“It’s like trying to find a single pearl buried in the desert. Luck needs to be on our side.”

“...Y-yeah.” That came from the back seat. The petite captain wrapped her arms around her knees and squeezed, hands clasped as though to pray. “Ah, Iska. Please be safe somehow.”

“We’ll have to celebrate if he’s still alive. They might have tortured him by slicing up his arms or legs or overdosing him on truth serum.”

“Could you stop, Jhin?!”

“I’m just saying to prepare yourself. We can’t count on him being safe.” Jhin gripped the steering wheel.

Noticing that his hands were sweaty, Jhin clicked his tongue quietly. It’d been ages since his palms had broken out in a sweat, not even when he was holding his sniper rifle.

“I hope we can find him, even though we’re grasping at straws.”

“Iska, I hope you’re okay...!” Nene muttered in a stifled voice. “If something happens to him here, I’ll use the experimental satellite weapon to make this place a sea of flames...”

“Nene, you’re scaring me!”

“I mean it!”

“Could you two please settle down? We’re in enemy territory. It’s not like the probability they overhear our convo is zero, even if

we're in a car."

What they needed to watch out for was astral power.

"We're traveling through the land of witches and sorcerers. It wouldn't be a reach for people to have the ability to listen in on conversations."

This was the Nebulis Sovereignty.

The witch's country was a world beyond common knowledge possessed by "humans."

4

The thirteenth state, Alcatroz.

The presidential suite prepared on the top floor of the hotel was currently bathed in a sweet aroma that wafted in the air.

Water splashed gently. White steam drifted out of the bathroom. And to go into more detail, Iska could hear the sound of a girl humming without straining to make it out—thanks to undergoing grueling training sessions.

Alice's happy humming kept leaking out of the bathroom.

"....." He had been forced to stand at attention in a corner of the living room with his hands bound by handcuffs.

...What am I doing?

...This is a far cry from torture, but I bet I look really pathetic right now.

The Sovereign princess had left her mortal enemy in the living room as she enjoyed a luxurious bath. In this situation, Iska couldn't help but feel he was being looked down upon by the Sovereignty.

...This is getting under my skin and makes me want to lash out.

...That said, if I barge into the bathroom right now, she'll get the wrong idea.

Though he wanted to be the heroic soldier who challenged the enemy princess, he would be branded as nothing more than a pervert for sneaking in while a young girl was taking a bath.

"Hey, Imperial swordsman."

"Ow." As his chain was yanked, the handcuffs tightened around his wrists.

"Don't you dare even think about getting up to no good."

The one holding the chain was the attendant, Rin.

Because Alice was taking a bath, she was currently wearing her

mistress's bracelet.

"While I'm keeping watch over you, I'll make sure you don't take a single step toward the bathroom where Lady Alice is bathing."

"...I think a person would be thinking of how to escape rather than how to get into the bathroom."

"I knew it! So you're planning an escape."

"It was just hypothetical!"

"I wouldn't mind. If you escaped, I could use that as an excuse to tear you to pieces. This time, even Lady Alice wouldn't stop me." She didn't even try to conceal her hostility.

"There's something I want to ask you."

"You think I'd answer you honestly?"

"What's going to happen to me?"

"..." Her sneer turned into a stern expression as she gazed at Iska, standing right next to her. The girl suddenly sighed. "Okay, fine. We're the ones who broke the rules in the neutral city. To make up for our wrongdoings, I'll answer you. That said, all you can really do is pray."

"Pray?"

"Lady Alice and I have different ideals. She hasn't decided what to do with you, but I myself propose that we keep you locked up in this place forever." She glanced at the glass wall.

From the top floor of the hotel, an expansive view of the city at night was visible. She was pointing to the buildings running along the horizon—warped and rugged spires.

When Iska took a good look, he saw two or three of them in the distance.

"Fifty years ago, this place wasn't part of the Sovereignty and prospered as the independent nation of Alcatroz. It had a specialized type of 'trade' with the neighboring cities."

"By 'trade,' you mean..."

"Prisoners," she uttered.

Iska doubted his ears.

Trade? What did she mean by that?

"In exchange for a considerable fee, they would accept and accommodate prisoners regardless of their country of origin. That was how Alcatroz flourished. They accepted the prisoners of the neutral cities and the rogues of the Sovereignty."

The steel buildings protected the city from not only the Imperial

military artillery but also any atrocious prisoners who managed to escape and rampage. The architecture was a means of defense for the civilians.

“...Then that tower is...”

“A prison spire. Prepare yourself. I advised Lady Alice to imprison you in one of those. And told her it was for her own sake.”

“...”

“Are you upset? This is the fate you chose, Imperial swordsman.” The girl gripped the chain connected to Iska. “Lady Alice offered you her hand once. You were the one to decline.”

“I know that.”

He didn’t need her to tell him that. Iska had been the one to reject the princess’s proposal. But even if she was to offer him the same agreement now, he had no intention of reconsidering it.

“I will secure you a position. You’ll become a refugee of the Empire.”

“I can’t. It’s not an issue of remuneration. I can’t stand on the Sovereignty’s side.”

They couldn’t walk down the same path. If Iska joined the Sovereignty, his dreams of peace between the two countries would be dashed.

“Above all, Lady Alice is still undecided. I’ll make sure justice reveals itself to her this time.”

“.....”

“I made two decisions on my own: When I poisoned you and when I attacked you earlier. As Lady Alice’s attendant, I’ll need to do as she wishes. There will be no third time.”

Her duty as an attendant was to imprison him or to take him to the border—if those were Alice’s orders.

“Tch.” She turned her face away, looking uncomfortable. “Don’t you tell her I said that to you.”

“Because it’s unfitting for an attendant?”

“...No. Because Lady Alice is strangely soft when it comes to you. If she mistakenly believes that we’ve opened our hearts to each other, then—”

Footsteps came from the bathroom. They could distinctly hear the faint humming from earlier.

“Whew, I’ve finally washed off all that sweat,” purred Alice,

sounding very relaxed. “You know I love the big bathtubs in the royal palace, but these bathtubs in the hotel aren’t bad, since they’re so easy to prep. Now I can use my time tonight as I please.” From the bathroom, Alice walked out to the living room. “Hey, Rin, about my change of clothes.”

“.....Um...”

“.....Lady Alice.”

When Iska and Rin both saw the princess, patting her flushed face in satisfaction, their expressions froze at the same time.

“My clothes—uh, what?”

Alice had come out of the bath with only a towel wrapped around her head.

Illuminated under the spotlight, she was stark naked without a thread covering her body. Her pale skin almost seemed translucent. After submerging in hot water, her face and earlobes were slightly red from the improved circulation.

Beads of water dripped from her neck and collarbone, dribbling into the valley of Alice’s chest as though drawn there naturally, then slipped down from her abdomen to her belly button.

She was incredibly beautiful and captivating.

“...Huh?”

What’s Iska doing here? screamed her expression. The nude figure opened and closed her eyes. But that lasted for only a moment.

“N-nooooooooooooooooooo?!”

It had totally slipped the princess’s mind.

She hadn’t just been there alone with Rin.

“W-wait a second; this isn’t what it looks like. Iska, I’m just...!” She yanked off the towel on her head and hid her breasts. Turning around, she tried to conceal the front of her body.

He was a boy. On top of that, he was a soldier of an enemy nation. Alice had taken an extremely natural action to hide her exposed skin from his eyes...except for one thing.

“...Is that an astral crest?”

“.....Ngh.” Her face twitched when he let that spill from his lips.

When the Nebulis princess had turned her back to him, she had exposed the enormous astral marking that started at the nape of her neck, went all the way down her back, and spanned the width of her shoulders.

There on her back, her bright-blue astral crest looked exactly like a pair of wings.

It was the sign of a witch, a mark that had started a century-long era of persecution, the emblem of “inhumanity.” And the astral crest on Alice was far larger than any he had seen in the past.

And its luminance... It was markedly stronger than any others, even though she wasn’t using any astral powers.

“.....” Iska hadn’t noticed her crest on the battlefield.

And he wouldn’t have been able to. She usually wore a regal dress, and if anything, her beautiful golden hair would have been covering her back.

“.....Iska.” Her voice was faint to the point of disappearing. She kept her back turned to him, astral crest on full display. The one who was feared as a witch continued in a weak voice. “What do you think of me now that you’ve seen *this* ?”

It was the cursed symbol of one who was supposed to be feared for representing the devil in ancient times. It was alien and of considerable size, faintly glowing. There had to be people who would be petrified by the idea that it surged with cursed power. This mark, the symbol of why the Empire considered her a monster, ran the entire length of her back.

“...Are you disgusted?”

“Lady Alice?! What do you think you’re saying?!” Rin left Iska’s side and dashed over to her lady, unable to remain still for any longer. The attendant latched firmly onto her dripping wet shoulders. “Astral crests are our pride and joy. Even the queen says as much. Your crest is more prominent than anyone’s, Lady Alice. There is no need to be embarrassed by it!”

“Thank you, Rin,” she replied graciously. “But that’s just what we think. The devil’s curse. A strange disease. The mark of a beast’s face. It’s a well-known fact that the Empire calls it those things.”

“.....”

“And it’s not just the Empire. Though it’s more covert, there are people who hate astral mages even in the neutral cities. Those people have influence with strong foundations.”

“.....Lady Alice...”

“Don’t get the wrong idea, Rin. I don’t mind any of that. I don’t care what anyone says about me. Like you said, the astral crest is my pride, but—” The girl with golden hair turned around. Holding

a thin layer of cloth against her breasts, the young princess stood directly in front of Iska. "I don't know why...but I want to know what you think. That's all I want. Now that you've seen it, I need to ask."

The prominent crest on Alice's back was large, and its lines swirled in a complex pattern.

After seeing this, I think that even his impression of me might change.

She was scared.

But she wanted to ask him. She wanted to know his honest opinion, rather than having him ornamenting the truth with lies.

Her darting eyes told him that.

"Do you think it's gross? You just gasped when you saw my astral crest. Why?"

"..."

"Tell me the truth. I won't be mad. My attitude toward you won't change even if you tell me I'm a creepy witch. It's just... I want to know what you really think." Those were the thoughts of Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX. Her eyes turned an intense shade of red and her eyelids swelled up. "Hey—"

"I know an Imperial captain who has become a 'witch.'" That was all Iska could say.

He faced the princess of the enemy nation—the girl who anxiously looked at him with upturned eyes.

"....." Silence.

Alice knew this captain, but Iska stopped himself before he said it out loud.

He didn't mention Captain Mismis's name. Still, Alice might have already figured it out. After all, Alice *had* seen her fall into the vortex.

"...I don't understand what you're trying to say." She weakly shook her head after some time. "What are you trying to say? An Imperial-soldier-turned-witch? That's not what I want to know. I want to know about what you think—"

"It's relevant," he continued without a moment's delay. "She's still an Imperial captain. Even as a witch. Even with an astral crest. I look up to her."

"....."

"Is the root of our conflict this crest? Has the war gone on for a whole century because of it? It hasn't. Nobody really cares about

this mark .”

Neither the Imperial soldiers nor the astral mage corps. Not a single person paid any mind to the spark that had triggered the war. But they continued to fight despite it.

“It’s not even about who started it first. The war is just about a pent-up thirst for revenge. I don’t think it’s about what’s right or wrong anymore.”

“.....Yes,” she rasped out. “...It’s just as you say. That’s the reason why Rin and I fight you, too. I don’t hate you or anything. It’s just that this was the lot I was given upon birth.”

“Then the astral crest doesn’t matter. It’s just about our country of origin.”

“—!” The Ice Calamity Witch’s eyes opened wide.

She realized what Iska was trying to tell her without saying it outright. The conflict was about their beliefs and positions. Though Mismis was a witch, her position as the captain of Unit 907 hadn’t changed. That was because her principles still held fast even now.

“So you don’t care about my astral crest at all? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“There isn’t a reason for me to worry about it.”

“...Really? This thing right here? Weren’t you surprised by it?”

“I honestly was surprised, since it’s bigger than any I’ve ever seen before. But it’s the same as seeing the biggest dog in the world or something.”

There was silence. A few seconds passed by.

“...That was rude.”

Contrary to her words, the princess burst into quiet laughter as tears beaded in her eyes. Her lips slightly regained their previous vigor as they drew back in a smile. That definitely wasn’t just Iska’s imagination.

“I’m sure you could have found something prettier for a comparison. You can’t say it’s like a big dog—at least compare it to a sizable jewel or something.”

“I don’t know much about gems. I’m just a low-ranking Imperial soldier.”

“...You idiot.” The girl smiled, chuckling. When she did, a tear slid down her cheek, which she brushed off with her finger. “Well, what do you think of me? Other than me being a witch?”

“About you, Alice?”

“Yes, about me. If you don’t think I’m a weird witch, then tell

me your impression of me.”

“A rival on the battlefield,” he responded.

“You brute! Just what do you think you’re saying to Lady Alice?!” Rin was overwhelmed by what was happening and opened her eyes wide. She glared at Iska, who stood next to her. “Lady Alice is the princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty, after all. You might have all the gifts in the world, but you shouldn’t casually throw out the word *rival* as though you are anywhere close to the same position as—”

“I don’t mind.”

“See, she doesn’t mind. Do you get it now?!Wait, *what* ?” Rin’s mouth went slack. When she turned around automatically, the attendant saw something unbelievable. “...Lady Alice.”

“I finally feel like a weight has been lifted from my chest. Yes, that is what I wanted to hear all along.” The Ice Calamity Witch Alice thrust a finger at Iska. “A ruffian who doesn’t treat me like I’m special. That’s the way you should be.” Her eyes glittered.

She appeared to be radiating happiness, as though she was a princess in distress who had caught sight of a knight’s arrival.

She was no witch.

No astral mage.

Not even a princess.

The first person to see me for who I really am.

“...It wasn’t unrequited.”

“You considered me a rival, too.”

She was happy about that. The strength in her voice made it immediately apparent.

“And sorry I asked you that out of the blue...” Alice turned away in embarrassment. “I’m sure any other Imperial soldier wouldn’t make me so flustered. Because it’s you, I just couldn’t let it go.”

“Alice, I have something important I need to say, too.”

“What could that be?”

“...Well...could you do something about your clothes soon? Or at least put on some underwear?”

“What?” She was soaking wet.

Alice must have been so carried away by their conversation that

she hadn't noticed that she'd let the towel slip out of her hands, leaving her completely nude and dripping with water before Iska.

"Ahhh?!" Alice's face turned bright red. She snatched up the towel on the ground in a panic and firmly pressed it to her body. "I-Iska! You're shameless! Where do you think you're staring?!"

"You're the one who came out to show yourself off, Alice!"

"That wasn't what I intended! Ugh, this is so unfair, Iska. If you're going to call me your rival, then we need to fight as equals. You saw me naked, so you show me!"

"What do you think you're saying, Alice?!"

"Lady Alice! Are you in your right mind?! Please keep it together!"

Their collective wails echoed through the presidential suite that night.



INTERMISSION



Secret Maneuvers

The steel metropolis was shrouded in the morning mist.

The night wind had beaten against the great Saint Elzaria River, spraying dew into the air, which gently showered the streets in the early morning. Alcatroz was lit by the sun, which slowly worked its way between the buildings as the silver-haired sniper stifled a yawn in the vehicle.

“It’s been a while since I’ve spent a night in a car. Hey, wake up, Nene.”

“...Jhin, what time is it?”

“It just turned six.”

“Agh. Already?” In the passenger seat, Nene got up from her reclining position, bundling together her hair, tousled during the night, and putting it up in her usual ponytail.

“Captain? Captain, you have to wake up, too.”

“.....”

“Hey, Jhin, Captain’s sound asleep.” Nene wore a bittersweet smile as she looked at the back seat.

The captain with blue hair had curled up in the back seat, which wasn’t wide by any means. Her cute snoring exemplified how she had fully capitalized on her petite body to sleep comfortably.

“What should we do?”

“We didn’t come here to sightsee. Hurry up and get her awake.”

“Okaaay. Hey, Captain! C’m on, Captain—” Nene leaned into the back seat just as the communications device that the captain was using as a pillow blared.

Its ringtones just about ruptured Mismis’s eardrums.

“Ack?! Wh-why did you do that?! Jhin?! Nene?! C-could you wake me up a little more gently...?!”

“Uh-uh. We haven’t done anything.”

“Oh, huh? So then...” Mismis was now alert, picking up the

communications device.

"Hello. Good morning to all of you in Unit 907. Did you sleep well?" asked a carefree feminine voice.

It was the voice of the Saint Disciple of the fifth seat, Risya In Empire, who was supposed to be on standby in the capital to command them.

"Not in this cramped car. I'd prefer a tent over this crap."

"Ha-ha, I'm relieved by your energy, Jhin-Jhin." The Saint Disciple seemed happy to field the sniper's grievances. *"Now then, Mismis? Can I ask where you are right now?"*

"Ummm, we're in a parking lot right in the center of Alcatroz. There are a ton of big buildings, and we're in their shadows."

As for the scene from the car window...

It was still six in the morning. The roads were covered in fog and sparsely populated by people coming and going. It was almost as though no one was in this particular parking lot.

The slate-colored buildings had well-maintained roads and sidewalks lining both sides. This cityscape was reminiscent of Imperial cities.

"...It just doesn't feel like we're in the Sovereignty."

"That's because you're at the very edge. Plus, it's only been fifty years since they've become a Sovereign state. Basically, the buildings haven't changed since they were independent."

It was different from the central state. The towns and cities of the Nebulis Sovereignty maintained a sacred harmony between nature and modern architecture. But this seemed to not have much influence on the urban design of Alcatroz.

"Isn't it convenient? The Imperial and Sovereign cultures have intermixed there. You won't stand out even if you walk around outside."

"R-right... I've been too frightened to go outside yet."

"It's fine—completely fine. The other special mission units have gone to each of their own states, walking around as they please. They're eating in restaurants and going shopping."

"Whaaat?!"

"Because all of that is precious information to the Empire. Oh, but you can't overdo it and land yourselves in a dungeon. Don't get me wrong, but I can't help you if you do."

"Hey, Lord Saint Disciple, we've got something more important to do." Jhin had spread out a map of the city over the driver's seat.

They had purchased it the night before. At present, it was

covered with check marks drawn by Jhin.

"Here. I heard rumors of it, but this place really is just full of prisons."

"Oh? Jhin-Jhin, you're quick to cut to the chase," commended the enthused voice on the other side. *"There are several prison spires in the thirteenth state. That's where they've rounded up prisoners within the Sovereignty. They accommodate the vilest of criminals and receive astronomical amounts of compensation from other countries. That's how they've developed economically."*

"That's why there were lots of guards walking around during the night."

The police had been out patrolling—not looking for Imperial infiltrators. They were units on the lookout for criminal escapees.

"Are they astral mages, too?"

"Of course. Naturally, there are astral mages among the imprisoned criminals. There's even the atrocious transcendental —Oh, that's a lie. Don't pay attention to that last part."

"What did you just say?"

"Now, Jhin-Jhin, could you start by moving the car? Turn to the right after getting out of that parking lot."

"...Tch. What a blatant lie." Clicking his tongue in disapproval, Jhin put the car in drive. He brought the car out just as Risyah had directed and went down the narrow roads ahead of them.

"Take a left at that crossroad. Now just go straight—"

"So, Risyah, I'm just kind of curious, but...", Mismis started.

"Hmm?"

"Are you watching us?"

Silence. Finally, familiar mirthful laughter came from the communications device on Mismis's knees.

"You're sharp today, Mismis. Is it because my directions are a little too accurate?"

"Because it'd be impossible unless you were looking at things from inside our car. How are you navigating an enemy city?"

"Why don't you stop the car in the shadow of that building? Then you'll understand."

The spot she had indicated was the back of an alleyway.

In the rear of the crowded, old buildings—in a place where raw garbage littered the street—they stopped the car and got out. Almost as if someone had spat out gum here, the bottoms of their shoes stuck slightly to the ground as they trudged down the dead-

end alley.

“I don’t like this... It’s so dark and cramped. It feels like the astral mage corps could be waiting to ambush us.”

“I agree. Jhin, be careful,” Nene warned.

“What else are we supposed to do? It’s the commanding officer’s orders.” Jhin heaved the gun case disguised as a golf bag as he sighed deeply.

But they found nothing there.

They were surrounded on three sides by walls etched with cracks. It was a dead end.

“Hello. Good morning, Unit 907.”

“Risya?!”

None other than Risya herself had appeared, now standing right there at the dead end before them.

Jhin scowled dubiously; Nene gulped; Mismis yelped from surprise.

Why?

The Saint Disciples were the personal guards of the Lord. Though they were dispatched to the battlefield on exception, like in the fight for the vortex, their work generally started and ended within the Imperial domain.

Did she have business within the Sovereignty’s borders?

“Uh, wh-why are you here, Risya?”

“Why wouldn’t I be here? Obviously you’re that important to me, Mismis,” the Saint Disciple replied, beaming. “Well, now that we’ve all gathered, let’s hurry up and get going.”

“.....What? Wh-where?”

“That’s obvious, isn’t it?” She patted Mismis’s head. The Saint Disciple of the fifth seat, Risya In Empire, narrowed her eyes behind her glasses. “To the place where Isk is being held prisoner. We’re busting *into the prison spires* . Duh.”

CHAPTER 4



Salinger, the Transcendental Sorcerer

1

The buildings glittered golden as the sun lit them up.

The morning mist that had settled in during the night was flushed out by the early-morning wind between the buildings, melting away without a trace.

They were in the hotel, in the presidential suite.

From their floor, which featured floor-to-ceiling glass panels on all sides, Alice elegantly watched the view below her. Her long golden locks shone wherever the sunlight landed.

Iska watched her absentmindedly from right beside her.

A girl and a boy connected by a single chain: Iska was in handcuffs, Alice had her bracelet, and those rings were tied together—to prevent Iska from escaping.

The sedative had stopped affecting his body the night before. The only things still restraining Iska were the handcuffs and the chain that bound him to the girl.

“Yow?!”

“Hey, Imperial swordsman, don’t get any closer to Lady Alice.”

That came from immediately behind Iska. Hovering by him, the attendant prodded his back with the tip of a paring knife. Unlike Alice in her dress, Rin was in her usual housekeeping uniform.

“What suspicious behavior. You must be trying to get close to Lady Alice so you can launch a sudden attack on her...”

“I just can’t get away from her because of the chain!”

“Then why were you looking at her?”

“...Are you telling me to look at the prison spires? It’s not like I *want* to look at the buildings where I might be imprisoned.”

He felt like a prisoner of war who had been brought up to the gallows. The prison spire, after all, was essentially the guillotine,

which he obviously didn't think too much about.

"Stop that, Rin. Don't threaten Iska. Why would you tell him we're putting him in jail?" Rin's mistress rebuked her. "Didn't I tell you just yesterday? We shouldn't have ever captured him in the first place. We'll demand a ransom, but after negotiations are over, we'll let him go home."

"I know that, but..." Rin let out a long sigh, lamenting as she looked back and forth between her lady and the prisoner. "You narrowly escaped death, Imperial swordsman. If Lady Alice was not so kind, you would have spent the rest of your life in Orelgan."

"Orelgan?"

"I have no obligation to explain what that is to you... Lady Alice, I will head to the first floor to communicate with the central state. After that comes checking on the schedule with the royal palace, since we've been away yesterday and today." Rin bowed and turned her back on them. The pair watched as she left the room.

"Can you see them?" *Kshk*. The chain rubbed against itself. Alice was connected to Iska by the wrist, pointing her finger beyond the glass. "Those three prison spires on the horizon."

"The two smaller ones and the tall one in the middle?"

"Yes. One of those is a prison spire called Orelgan. It is the most closely guarded of them all. There are atrocious criminals locked up in there."

"...I see."

You better not lay a hand on Lady Alice , Rin would have threatened if she had been in the room.

"I gather it's full of terrifying prisoners?"

"*Other than one part of it* , the prison is normal. It's not as though those criminals are all powerful astral mages. I once visited the place when I was young, but they were all in their cells and sitting down in handcuffs, I think."

"...And the exception?"

"It's underground. Orelgan extends beyond the surface, and there's a room at the lowest depths that the guards refused to show me."

A place that even the princess couldn't visit?

There were two possibilities he could think of immediately. One was that the prisoner was so bone-chilling, they wouldn't allow visitors. The other was that the prisoner in the cell was—

“Salinger, the ‘transcendental’ sorcerer. Not that I expect you to know him. Unless you do?”

“No, not at all... But is *that* because he’s a prisoner?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Alice, you just said *sorcerer* .”

Iska hadn’t ever heard of the sorcerer Salinger. But he was compelled to ask his question because he was surprised the Sovereign princess would be calling a mage a *sorcerer* .

...*I mean, witches and sorcerers are derogatory terms for people with astral power.*

...*Aren’t they all astral mages to the Nebulis Sovereignty?*

As one who ultimately sought peace between the two nations, Iska tried to use *astral mage* whenever possible, unless he had a specific reason. Someone with the same goal as him wouldn’t be compelled to use that term.

“Alice, I thought you’d get angry if someone from the Empire called you that.”

“I would.”

“...Then why did you just call him a *sorcerer* ?”

“I don’t want to use that term, either. But we do for him. Our country accepts all astral mages and protects them. But those who commit crimes require punishment. Those who are imprisoned are called witches and sorcerers.”

“.....”

“Salinger the Transcendental turned his blade on the then-queen. A terrible criminal who schemed to overthrow the country. The word *sorcerer* is the label borne by those who commit heinous crimes.”

It wasn’t a symbol of discrimination but of transgression.

In the Empire, someone who turned their sword on the Lord would face nothing short of execution. The queen must have been lenient for sentencing him with only imprisonment.

“Regardless, this is about something that took place thirty years ago.” Alice shrugged. “It happened during the time of Nebulis VII. And since then, the deepest point in Orelgan has been the den of that sorcerer.”

“...Did he turn his sword on the queen because he was unhappy?”

“No.”

“Then because he wanted to become the Sovereignty’s king?”

"Close, but not quite." The princess with a right to succeed the throne pursed her lips, placing her hand on the glass pane. "That sorcerer attempted to become *something greater than king*."

"—Gh?"

"Okay, that's all I can say... Gosh, this is bad. When you're listening, I always say too much. I've already revealed top secret information to you." Alice grinned wryly and awkwardly as she pointed at him with her slender finger. "You can't go around telling everyone in the Empire, now."

"...I know that."

"Or Rin for that matter. If you tell her that I told you about Salinger, then she'll be even more vindictive about not letting you go home alive—"

"Lady Alice."

"Woo-oof?!" Alice leaped with enough force to hit the ceiling. "I—I wonder what you might need, Rin?"

"I'd like to ask you the same. Did you just yip like a puppy? Your behavior as a princess is—"

"That's all fine. What happened?"

Rin had exhibited a slight nervousness that escaped Iska, but her lady had seen through the subtle change in her demeanor.

"There was a report. It's just..." Rin trailed off.

"Is Iska an issue?"

"No, I believe there is no issue with him hearing. If anything, his presence is convenient." She glanced at Iska for a moment before turning to her lady. "We suspect agents have passed through the border and infiltrated the country."

"...What did you say?"

"In twelve of the states, excluding the central state, the residents have reported seeing strange groups. We have considered the possibility that they might be Imperial spy units and issued a formal statement for everyone to be on high alert."

"You think they followed us from the neutral city?"

"No." The attendant shook her head. "I mean, the chances of being tailed aren't zero. But it should be incredibly difficult for a member of the Imperial military to cross our borders in the first place... Isn't that right, Imperial swordsman?"

"I don't know anything." Prudently selecting his words, Iska raised his handcuffed hands.

Had their prisoner guided them in some way?

Considering the incredibly coincidental timing of the Imperial military's actions, they immediately suspected Iska. This was no joking matter. It was a false accusation.

"I've been here this whole time for the past two days. You did several body checks on me and took away my communications device. Plus, wouldn't you know more about the difficulty of slipping through the Sovereignty's defenses?"

The astral trial.

It was far too dangerous for an Imperial soldier to make an attempt to cross the border. If they were caught, they would be interrogated and forced to spill all the secrets of the Empire.

But Iska could think of at least one person who had the ability to cross the border.

...Could it be Captain Mismis?

...Since she has astral power, she would be able to get across the border by showing them the crest on her shoulder.

The chances were extremely low. If anything, the only one who could do it was Captain Mismis. Would she really leave behind Jhin and Nene to act on her own?

...Captain Mismis wouldn't be that rash.

...Plus, Jhin and Nene would never allow it in the first place.

Therefore, he really didn't know anything. He had answered with the truth.

"I don't intend to suspect you of anything. I've been with you this whole time." Alice took off the bracelet and undid the chain that connected the two of them together.

Alice was free. Iska was still handcuffed by both hands, immobile for the most part.

"Rin, you said these groups have been witnessed in places other than Alcatroz? In that case, it's clear that he hasn't incited this and that we haven't been followed."

"Yes, they seem to be moving in a very systemic way."

"Let's wait to hear what my mother orders. I'd like to take a walk and get a look outside. You stay here, Rin. And you too, Iska."

With a gentle sweep of her fingers, she quickly brushed aside her golden bangs lit up by the sun.

Her voice carried the weight of her resolve.

"I want to release you on agreeable terms, but you heard that just now. The situation won't allow it. I just can't get away from you, no matter how I try... It seems a strange fate ties us both

together.”

The Ice Calamity Witch Alice exited the presidential suite.

2

It was slowly growing dark.

This was the time of day when the madder-red sky seemed as though it were ablaze as the sun sank behind the tall buildings. The shadows of the twisted spires grew long and stretched across the plots of grass.

One of them was Orelgan.

Even among the prison spires characteristic of the thirteenth state, Orelgan was a place that housed only the most wicked of criminals. The site was surrounded by cold iron fencing, and the windows were adorned with bars.

“It’s not any different from Imperial cells. But the prison seems a generation older than anything in our country.”

They were three levels underground.

Concealing himself in the shadow of a protruding wall, Jhin muttered in a stifled voice.

“Cramped passageways and walls made of stone. The lights are reinforced glass. The cells are made of steel, and just one set of doors weighs over sixty pounds. Opening even one is a pain in the ass.”

“...Right. I agree. They’re not using a mechanical authentication system,” whispered Captain Mismis into his ear. “In the Empire, the doors would be automatic, and if the prisoners had escaped, they would know from the surveillance cameras. But they don’t even have those. Right, Nene?”

“Hmm.” Nene brought up the rear of their three-person line, glancing around the basement floor from the darkness. “I think it would break them.”

“What’s that?”

“I mean, the surveillance cameras would have to be in corners of the ceiling. Like there. But everyone in here is either a witch or a sorcerer, right? Cameras are easy to spot, so any attempted escapees would have broken them already. With their astral power.”

“Oh, right...!” Mismis agreed.

The prisoners could unleash astral power. Even with the

Empire's anti-astral power weapons, signal jamming could interrupt waves of astral power for only two or three seconds max. There was no way to render astral attacks entirely useless.

Which was why these prisons simply had to be strong and durable.

"I guess they can't use automatic doors, either. A strong astral attack would be able to break through a weak mechanical barrier, and they could make their escape. If I oversaw the surveillance here, I think I'd make it this way, too. A thick stone wall wouldn't be vulnerable even with fire- or wind-types," observed Nene.

There was another side to the communications engineer. While she had been enrolled in officer cadet school, she had been scouted as an engineer by the Department of Suppression Weapons Development at the capital. If she hadn't met Iska, Jhin, and Mismis, she probably would have become a top researcher there.

"Which is why this prison spire was built underground?" asked Mismis.

"Pretty much. It's hard to imagine, but this works better than making it reach the sky."

The spire rose five stories above the ground but stretched eleven stories underground. That was the way the Orelgan prison spire had been built. The only way to move around the floors of the entire structure was by stairway. Those stairs were limited to those designated for common use and the emergency exit.

"We're currently on the underground third level. What time is it now, Nene?"

"Nineteen hundred. We've still got four hours left."

"That's that. We're on standby here until twenty-three hundred. We don't have anything specific to do. We're emergency personnel. We'll only spring into action when there's been an accident." With the sniper rifle slung across his shoulder, Jhin leaned against the wall.

The air was stagnant, smelling of mildew whenever they breathed it in this underground prison.

"Don't make a sound, Captain. The inmates in the cells will be able to hear you. It'd be a pain if you yelled and they called in the guards."

"I wouldn't yell unless there was a reason to!" Captain Mismis clamped her hand over her mouth. "Hey, I wonder if Iska really is locked up here. Risya said there was a chance."

“The commanding officer said so. Regardless, we don’t have much of a choice when she orders us to come with her.”

“Iska is in the Orelgan prison spire.”

“He was brought to the thirteenth state after all. That makes this the most probable place. I imagine he’d be on the lowest level or something.”

Unit 907 had investigated enough to know this state was known as the “prison block” within the Nebulis Sovereignty.

“It’s the most appropriate place to hold Iska after taking him. But...”

“I-is there something wrong, Jhin?” Mismis asked.

“They’ve come to this conclusion too quickly. Plus, the Saint Disciple is one of the personal guards of the Lord. It’s unusual for them to leave the capital—especially when this isn’t even a fight for the vortex.”

The vortex was the most terrible of resources due to its ability to strengthen a mage. Because of that, in a desperate attempt to take it, the Saint Disciple Nameless had been dispatched to the front. What was going on this time that made it so important?

“You think there’s something that would bring a Saint Disciple all the way out here?”

“B-but...maybe it’s because they think rescuing Iska is as big a deal as protecting the vortex?” Mismis offered.

“There are seven.”

“Seven what?”

“Seven prison spires in this state. Meaning seven possible spires where Iska could have been taken. But Risya picked this one without hesitation. Why? It’s not like that Saint Disciple to rely on instincts.”

“In what way?”

“She wouldn’t make a move unless she was fairly certain—certain Iska was here. Or—”

“O-or?”

“Iska’s rescue is just a justification.”

Glancing at the stairway that continued to the underground eleventh floor behind them, the sniper spat this out with loathing.

“We came here for a different reason... For a reason they didn’t bother telling underlings like us.”

A beautiful piano sonata flowed from the speakers on the ceiling, the notes echoing throughout the extensive underground space—the eleventh floor of the Orelgan spire.

The ceilings and the walls were all adorned with murals of meadows. The stone floor was covered with a thick carpet that stimulated the senses when walking on it.

“A Saint Disciple? Oh, one of the dogs of the monstrous Lord. I’m impressed you crossed the border to get here,” sneered and admired the masculine voice. “I’ll allow you to tell me your name, hound of the Empire.”

“Risya In Empire. Did I need an appointment?”

“Not at all. Even if you did, I wouldn’t bother remembering it.”

All around the man were glass walls several inches thick. The one who stood in front of the panes was a tall Saint Disciple wearing black-rimmed glasses.

Of course, it was Risya In Empire, wearing a photochemical camouflage suit that perfectly fitted the contours of her whole body.

“Salinger the Transcendental. A sorcerer incarcerated by the Sovereignty thirty years ago, according to the Lord. But you seem quite young. Are you really him?”

“Ha!” The man behind the glass laughed.

The sonata continued to play in a prison room filled with artful murals. A man with white hair lounged on his side atop the elegant sofa that furnished the space.

“I’m impressed you would speak to me in that way. Vixen, are you so confident because you are shielded by the Lord?”

“Not at all.” Shaking her head, Risya smirked with her crimson lips coated in rouge. “I just thought that I’d found a wonderful, amazing gentleman. And a half-naked one to boot. I was so fascinated by you that I almost forgot my duties.”

“Do as you please. Look to your heart’s content,” the tall man told her seriously.

His hair was stiff, and his features were chiseled and fair. With sharp eyes, his expression exuded a sense of absolute confidence. He could have easily been mistaken for a supermodel in a magazine as he reclined on the sofa without a shirt. His exposed physique was muscular, with not a single hint of excess.

He had the allure of someone who could entrance the women of the world with a single glance.

“But what a pleasant surprise. Tell me, Risya. How did you get in here? The grounds entrance, the entryway, the central staircase—all of it should be closely guarded. Did you do them in?”

“I used agreeable methods.” She pulled out a fluttering piece of paper.

It was an entry permit.

If she wasn’t a Sovereign subject, they shouldn’t have issued one to her. And they should have taken particular care in checking her identity when she was accessing the underground eleventh floor.

“I got my citizenship specifically for this reason.”

“Dual citizenship. For flitting between the Empire and the Sovereignty, is it?”

“Do keep it a secret. If they find out someone from the Empire has infiltrated them, it’ll be difficult for me to get around next time... Well, even if I don’t remind you, you wou—”

“Wouldn’t care. I would forget tomorrow.”

An Imperial soldier had snuck into the Nebulis Sovereignty—appearing right before his very eyes. Even then, the man remained unfazed.

He was Salinger the Transcendental, the sorcerer who had been caged at the very bottom of the Orelgan prison spire.

But what was the meaning behind the state of this floor? It had the air of an aristocrat’s private chamber. A luxurious carpet had been laid out under the sofa, and the light patter of music filled the room.

“Oh, you’re wondering about this interior decoration? I ordered the prison officers to get these for me.”

“My. So you really are different, Master Sorcerer.”

Though he had been imprisoned, the inmate had intimidated an officer. Based on the state of the room, the man named Salinger knew how to influence people.

“Well, putting that aside. I don’t have enough time to sit around listening to music, so I’ll be blunt. May I tell you the reason I came to this place?”

He was silent.

Speak. In front of the sorcerer who compelled her with his composure, the executive and direct subordinate of the Lord made her announcement.

“We will be releasing you. Immediately.”

“.....”

“Oh? You don’t seem very happy.”

“Vixen,” the man on his side growled with wrath. “Who do you think I am?”

“Why, Salinger the Transcendental. The unprecedented criminal with an ambition to become *greater than the royal family*. The one who single-handedly broke into the royal palace thirty years ago. Even when you reached the queen, those directly descended from the Founder stood in your way. There were two, right?”

“Three. Don’t forget the most important one—the queen herself.”

“Ah yes.”

It had been just a rebel against three of the Nebulis bloodline.

Risya naturally understood the strangeness of this situation. She had already made a preliminary inquiry into the incident that had happened thirty years prior.

“‘Nobility dwells not in lineage but in ideals.’ That was supposedly your favorite phrase.”

“In that case, you should watch your tongue.” His handsome features scowled. “You said you would *release* me? Are you attempting to make a beggar out of me? If you are under the direct command of the Lord, you certainly would not err in the decorum with which you make your remarks.”

“How rude of me. Well then, I humbly correct myself. Our nation has planned a large-scale operation. We would like to borrow your abilities.”

“An attack on the central state?”

“Yes, to be concrete, we will infiltrate the royal palace.” She pushed up the bridge of her glasses.

The doubtful sorcerer intently looked at her.

“Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX,” she continued.

“.....”

“The current queen, known by all in this nation. The one and only. She was one of the brave heroes who imprisoned you thirty years ago when you fought Nebulis VII.”

“Ha! Idiotic.” He closed his eyes. “You want to sway me with a chance to seek revenge? How foolish. Retaliation is nothing more than the endeavors of a lowly man. It goes against my aesthetics. Regardless, I pay no heed to young maidens like Mirabella.”

“....”

“However...” He opened one eye, slowly getting up from the sofa, and held out both hands. “I’m somewhat bored of this underground lifestyle. That is the truth. Fine. If you can break these bracelets, then try.”

They gave off an ebony luster. He seemed to be showing her the two bracelets on his arms.

“They’re astral relics that were left behind by the people of the stars. These are just imitations, but they are a menace to astral mages nonetheless.”

“Yes, of course I know.” She nodded.

Psht. Cracks ran along the glass wall that separated the two even though neither of them had laid a finger on it.

“I will do as I so please. I will head to the central state; however, I will not accept instruction on when I attack the royal palace.”

“That is more than enough. You will leave this place behind. The central state will be thrown into a state of confusion just by hearing the news that Salinger has disappeared from the prison spire.”

At last, the glass completely shattered, breaking into thousands of pieces and dancing in the air like snowflakes. Adorned by dizzying fragments of glittering light, the inmate with white hair stood up.

“I suppose I’ll go. *To transcend the royals.* ”



An earsplitting alarm blared.

The reverberations came from the bullhorns on the ground, traveling through the concrete walls and echoing three stories underground.

“Ugh, wh-what is this?!” Mismis, leaning against the wall, scowled.

They had been frightened about the prison-spire guards discovering them as they hid. There was no way she wouldn’t be shaken by the alarm going off.

“They found us?! Uh, but isn’t this weird timing?”

“Right. We’ve been on standby here. Not a single guard has

come through in that time, but if we were the reason for the alarm, they probably would have turned it on a while ago.” Jhin lifted his sniper rifle off his shoulder. “Although if another guest burrowed their way in, this timing is too perfect, in which case—”

“Oh! Maybe it’s Risya?!” suggested Mismis.

“There’s a high chance that Iska is being kept here, so I’ll go check.” Maybe the reason they hadn’t heard from her in nearly an hour after she had departed was because she had been caught while infiltrating the place?

But...would someone who held a high seat as a Saint Disciple even commit such a blunder?

“Shhh. Captain, Jhin! Keep quiet!” Nene put a finger to her lips. The girl with the ponytail looked up with a grave gaze as footsteps echoed from the emergency stairs above them.

“...Guards? Uh, huh? But...”

“Not regular guards. They’re suppression squads for capturing inmates.”

All of them gripped anti-astral power riot shields. The Empire had developed them to defend personnel against conjured flames, cutting winds, and bolts of lightning, but these were likely just imitations.

“They look exactly like the protective gear from the Imperial military. Those’ll be your best bet if you’re facing an astral mage prisoner. In that case, I don’t think we’re the targets.”

“Then maybe it’s Risya?! Th-this is terrible! We need to help her...” Captain Mismis looked as though she had made up her mind, reaching for her gun. “She’s my friend.”

“You should be calling her the commanding officer, boss.”

“It doesn’t matter! Anyway...I can’t let this happen. Iska got caught when I couldn’t help him, and this time Risya is being targeted.” She went pale as she gnawed her lip. “I have to help her.”

Gripping her handgun with both her small hands, she looked almost as ethereal as a priest offering a prayer and as gallant as—

“Hey, boss! Your left arm...!”

“What?” The witch belonging to the Imperial military hadn’t noticed the light coming from her left arm. The green astral light flooded out from under her clothes. “Huh? Wh-what is this?! Jhin, what’s happening to my left shoulder?”

“How should I know? It’s got to be the astral power, obviously!”

Mismis was in a fluster as she clamped a hand over her shoulder. This was happening despite being covered by a skin-toned bandage and her jacket.

“Hurry up and hide it, boss.”

“B-but I don’t know what to—” She put her hand over her clothes, trying to intercept the light. Right when that happened...

...an impact that originated from deep below shook the prison spire.

A roar and shock wave rolled outward as if from the detonation of a powerful bomb.

The impact almost made them lose consciousness. Meanwhile, the stone wall warped as fragments of rock clattered from the crumbling crevices.

“...What was that just now? Did they let a rocket explode underground or something?”

“I-it’s still shaking, Jhin!”

The rumble emanating from the bowels of the earth had yet to cease. It was all Jhin could do to just stay standing. Nene and Mismis held on to each other to keep upright, but a regular person would have toppled over on the spot.

“Oh, hello? Mismis, you all right?”

“Risya?!”

“Oh, I’m relieved you’re fine. But I’m guessing the suppression squads are already coming to the lower floors, so you should keep your voice down,” she said through the communications device.

They couldn’t detect any nervousness from her blasé tone.

“So you’re okay, Risya? I’m so relieved...!”

“Me? Of course I’m fine. So you can all run along now.”

“...Huh?”

“You could hear that sound just now over there, couldn’t you? He broke through an underground wall, went into the hole, then opened up a gigantic shaft leading to the surface. Astral power is really something.”

“W-wait a second, Risya?! Uh, um...what about Iska?!”

“Oh, sorry, Mismis.” She sounded dejected. *“I looked for Isk, but he wasn’t here. I did find a strong sorcerer in the lowest area. When I let him get out to rampage, this is what happened. Hee-hee.”*

“...Uhhh...which means...”

“So, ladies and gentlemen of Unit 907, the one you were seeking is not here. It’s time to withdraw. Take care not to get caught by the suppression squads.”

“What are you talking about?!”

Psht. The communications device cut off.

Jhin gave Mismis a firm pat on the shoulder as she stood there, dumbstruck. “We’re heading out, boss.”

“Ow!”

“I don’t know what that Saint Disciple did here, but I know that the guards must have realized Imperial soldiers have infiltrated this prison spire. That’s why the Saint Disciple is already taking a different getaway route. We need to run for it, too.”

“Jhin, does that mean we’re the decoys?!”

They were there to buy the Saint Disciple Risya time to run away.

That was the reason why she had had Unit 907 accompany her to this prison spire.

“That’s right. I don’t know what she wanted out of this. Just thinking about it is useless. Our problem is *that* .” Even as Jhin looked upstairs, the sound of footsteps came one after another.

Though most of the suppression squads had already gone underground, continuing to descend the stairs, six people had stopped on the same underground third floor they were on, starting to search the cells.

“...We’re stuck. That Saint Disciple should’ve told us two minutes earlier if she was going to say anything.” Jhin clucked his tongue.

The squads had gathered on the underground second floor and the fourth. The third had a six-person squad currently conducting a sweep of the cells. Though they were checking cells in the back at the moment, they would find Unit 907’s hiding spot soon.

They weren’t simply stuck.

Put bluntly, they were completely surrounded by the suppression squad.

“Hey, this is bad. We barely have any weapons...!” Nene said.

When they had crossed the border, they had left most of their gear in the capital.

Jhin had his sniper rifle and a scarce amount of ammo.

Nene had an electroshock gun and anti-astral power hand grenades. The weapons Mismis had were as good as nothing

because she was carrying only Iska's astral swords in a bag on her back.

"Fighting them head-on is impossible. There's nothing we can do in a cramped passageway."

Plus, they were battling armed astral mages. If any astral attacks were aimed at their position, they would have no place to run. If they counterattacked, it didn't take much guessing to know reinforcements would be called immediately.

Either we wait until we're discovered in our hiding spot.

Or we jump out right now and get spotted.

Two hopeless choices.

In any case, they couldn't avoid a battle with the suppression squad. If they resisted with all they had, one or two of them might have been able to break through the encirclement, but the chances of all of them surviving was next to nil.

"We need to find a safe escape route that leads to the surface. In order for a miracle to happen..." Jhin's thoughts were clear.

If they wanted high returns, they needed to be willing to take high risks. In other words...

"We need a decoy. Well, that'll probably be me." The boy with silver hair sighed. "Nene, boss, you stay on standby here. I'll jump out and get their attention. The moment there's an opening, take out all of them. You got that?"

"W-wait, Jhin! That should be your role. I'll be the decoy."

"They won't be scared if you do it. Think of how you look."

Nene was disguised as a normal person.

If she had been in her Imperial battle uniform, the suppression squad would have been on their toes, but if she jumped out in her street clothes, would they really see her as a threat?

The answer was no.

One or two of the soldiers might pursue Nene, and the rest would continue searching the cells.

"Think about it: Me, a guy with a gun, jumping out versus you. Just think of which is going to draw their attention."

"...B-but... But with the equipment the captain and I have, we'll have a heck of a time taking down that whole squad, even if they're not on their A game. They might catch us, and if you get attacked while that happens, then it's all over!"

"In that case, all you can do is pray that won't happen. Hey, boss, you're fine with this, right?"

“...”

“Boss?” The boy held the sniper rifle, and the girl gripped her electroshock gun.

Feeling the gazes of her two subordinates, Mismis pursed her lips, then bit down on them as she firmly gripped her left shoulder.

...I'm scared.

...And I really don't want to do this. But...!

But she had made up her mind.

In order to protect her subordinates, she would...

“I'll be the decoy.”

“What?”

“Hey, boss, were you listening to me? It'd be one thing if you had your combat uniform, but to jump out the way you're dressed right now? They wouldn't be surprised at all. You can't do anything to draw their attention—”

“I can.” Instead of saying the rest, Mismis firmly sliced through her jacket with a dagger used by covert operatives. Cutting the sleeves off, she showed off the bare skin of her left shoulder.

Right.

She really didn't want to do this, because it would be the same as accepting that she was a witch.

But...

“...I'm a witch now.”

She tore off the skin-toned bandage, revealing the crest—the mark that contained astral power—that emitted a brilliant emerald light.

“Captain?”

“Hey, boss, you can't be serious!”

“This prison has a ton of captured witches, right? In that case —”

She didn't wait for her subordinates to respond. Throwing off the bag that contained Iska's astral swords, Mismis said nothing as she jumped from the shadows of the passageway...

...and purposefully showed her crest.



“...*I-I’ve escaped!*” Mismis yelled loudly—making sure her shout reached the ears of the six conducting a search on the third floor who were approaching from the end of the passageway.

“An escapee?!”

The captain’s wager paid off.

“So there was one!”

“That woman must have caused the explosion. Just look at the astral light coming from her shoulder... She’s a strong witch. All hands on deck!”

They took the bait.

Mismis’s desperate gamble had made the suppression squad change their focus. They had no doubt that Mismis was an escaped criminal.

“Stop!” She swallowed back the *please* that she had been on the verge of saying. “M-my astral power...will blow us all away with one shot! B-because I’ve totally got really strong powers!”

“...”

On one side of the passageway was the suppression squad, armed with shields that were specifically designed to protect them from astral-power attacks. The squad members themselves were astral mages, veterans with training on how to corner and defeat escaped convicts.

In contrast, Mismis couldn’t use a single astral attack at all.

It wasn’t clear how far this bluff would go...

“Are you done talking yourself up?” muttered the man standing at the front. “We have no mercy for an escaped witch. In accordance with article nineteen of the Imprisonment Law, we will execute you.”

“.....”

“Move in.”

The burly and heavily armed group sprang into action.

By the time they started moving, Mismis had already turned her back to them and sprinted down the hallway. If she got caught, her life was over. She had naturally expected escapees would be executed on the spot. That was the gamble of pretending to be an escaped criminal. The risks the decoy faced were incredibly high.

But...

“This is the only way.” Mismis gritted her teeth. She didn’t let her legs pause for a second, heading for the corner of the hallway. If

she turned there, she would once again exit out to a long passage. "Because only I can fill this role...!"

The light still glittered on her left arm. The glow of the artificial astral crests on Jhin's and Nene's arms were too weak. If any of them was going to pretend to be a powerful witch who had forced her way out of prison, the most realistic candidate was Mismis, who was a real witch with visibly stronger astral power. She could draw away the suppression squad.

...Because I'm already a witch.

...As long as I continue to live as an Imperial captain, I'll need to hide the fact that I've become a witch.

In which case, at least while she was in this Paradise of Witches, she might as well embrace her witch identity.

She had no qualms if this meant they would be able to get home alive. If she was doing it to protect her subordinates, she would make full use of her terrible stroke of bad luck.

"After this, I just need to escape...!"

She wanted to keep their attention on her, even if only for one more second.

She would guide them, leading the suppression squad following behind her to her target destination.

Snap! An ice whip hit the wall not far from her.

"An ice attack?!"

There were six people in the suppression squad. It was definitely one of their powers.

The ice whip ran along the wall before rooting itself in it, stretching out to entangle itself in Mismis's feet. She barely managed to leap away from it in time.

...I need to remain calm. Astral power of ice isn't that unusual.

...What else is there? Come on, Mismis. You studied this in the Empire.

She usually left combat to her subordinates, because she'd end up slowing them down if she joined. Meaning all she did was watch from a distance.

On one hand, she was proud to have subordinates she could count on, but she also couldn't shake the persistent feeling of worthlessness.

But right now...

"Now you're coming at me with fire?!" She spun around when a wave of searing heat lapped at the nape of her neck.

A wall of flames filled her vision. They weren't planning to arrest her—this was a deliberate attempt to execute Mismis, the escaped criminal.

"I can't...let myself die in a place like this!" She took a sharp turn in the passageway. It couldn't have been more than a second later that the entire hallway she had just come from was engulfed in flames.

But it wasn't over yet. The astral flame vanished in the blink of an eye, and she could hear the footsteps of the suppression squad closing in—and coming in front of her, too.

"They went the other way around?!"

From both sides of the passageway, the armed officers held their riot shields at the ready, locking her in place. With their intimate knowledge of the layout of the prison, the squad had accurately predicted where she was heading, splitting into two teams to corner Mismis.

"—Argh, then I'll...!" Even if she was surrounded from the front and back, there was one last place to turn into nearby. If she escaped down that way...

Just as she got ready to do that...

...a gunshot rang out. Mismis's body slammed into the floor as she felt a sharp pain jolt her thigh.

"Don't give us any more trouble, witch."

There was another loud crack of gunfire.

The next bullet tore through her skin as she tried to get up. The source was a large handgun, most likely based on an Imperial weapon. The designers must have imitated the build after retrieving a sample from the battlefield.

"An escaped inmate. Well, I guess you didn't escape—as long as we finish you off right here, that is." One of her pursuers prodded her with the handgun, jamming the tip against Mismis's forehead as she remained in a heap on the ground.

There was a man holding another gun coming to block her on the other side.

"....."

"Why're you looking at me like that? If you're going to beg for your life, you've gotta work harder."

She didn't respond to the man's provocation. "...Are you going to torture me before you kill me?"

She was more than familiar with how to use a gun and

understood exactly what was happening. He didn't miss the earlier shots: The man had shot slightly off target to scare her.

Or they were doing it to humiliate her because she was a woman. Regardless—

"Amateurs." With the gun still pointed at her, Mismis dauntlessly glared at the man. "Wounded beasts are to be feared. Anyone who's slow with a gun is as good as an amateur to me. Evidence that you don't have enough experience."

"Looks like you don't understand the position you're in." The cold tip of the gun pushed against her forehead. "A wounded beast? And what makes you a beast? That astral crest... It's emitting a strong light, but you won't amount to much in battle. If you did, you would have used it already."

"Who can say?"

"I can. You aren't a beast. You're just an escaped criminal who's about to be executed."

"..." She gritted her teeth.

There wasn't a single person in the world who wouldn't be scared of a gun in between their eyes, but...

"Come at me." She had taken on the risks to come this far, which was why she would win her gamble. "I never said *I* was the wounded beast."

"What?"

"Just look at who's behind you."

"Ha. Now you're trying to fool me. Who would—?"

His voice froze. There was no way anyone would be there. In fact, when the man from the suppression squad checked his periphery, he really didn't see anyone...*not even his own colleagues*.

The five others had been chasing down the escaped criminal. At this moment, he finally realized that the footsteps that had been running at his side had abruptly stopped at some point—and he was *the last one* standing.

"Huh?!" His colleagues were collapsed in the back of the passage while others were already facedown to the front.

"...All I needed to do was buy some time. I can't believe you underestimated me—thinking you could play around before you killed me. As long as my subordinates were able to take down the enemy in time, I won't sweat the details." As she hid her witch's mark with her right hand, the Imperial captain howled, "Even if I've become a witch, I'm still part of the Empire! I won't lose to the

enemy!”

“Get down, boss,” whispered Jhin through the communications device.

At the same moment, Mismis flattened herself against the floor and pressed her head to the ground.

Sniper fire.

The single shot flew from the back of the passageway straight toward its goal, plowing into the handgun that had been pointed at Mismis.

“Sorry for the wait, Captain.”

From behind the last man standing, Nene had silently approached like a feral beast and discharged her stun gun. A high-voltage current surged through the ballistic fibers, knocking out her victim with one hit.

He fainted.

“...Whew. With that, I think we’ve cleaned up all the enemies on the floor.” Nene swiped the gun from the guard’s hand and took a deep breath. “I’m so relieved. That was a close one, Captain. A stellar performance. You did a great job as the decoy—”

“Neneeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

“Ah?!”

“I was so scaaaared! If you were a few seconds too late, I would’ve definitely been shot!” Pouncing on her subordinate, Mismis clung to Nene.

“There, there, Captain. Is your gunshot wound okay?”

“Y-yeah. It was mostly a graze... What about you two?”

“It’s not like *we’d* get hurt.” In the back of the hallway, with his sniper rifle in hand, the silver-haired young man appeared. “We were behind the guys chasing you. No reason why we’d get hurt. Considering their body armor, I don’t think they’re dead, either.”

“Should we take them hostage?”

“For what? We’ll just head straight up. We got the goods, after all.”

He was referring to the suppression squad’s weapons and shields.

For the trio who had brought the bare minimum with them, those spoils of war had the potential to be their saving grace.

“It’s the first time in a while the boss was in combat. I’ll praise you for that. I guess this is the first time in a while you’ve gotten any praise, too.”

"That wasn't even close to praise!"

"More importantly, there's something that's bothering me." Jhin looked pointedly at Mismis's left shoulder—at the emerald astral crest.

Compared to earlier, its glow had settled down considerably, but the mark was still very visible on her skin.

"This astral power that possesses you, boss... It might be a strong one."

"Huh? Wh-what are you saying, Jhin?!"

When she thought back, she remembered the man from the suppression squad had been saying something. Mismis herself honestly wasn't happy in the least about it.

...It feels like they're saying I've been possessed by a powerful demon.

...What kind of girl would be happy to hear that?

"That doesn't put me in a good mood. Hiding it is so much trouble..." She pulled out a spare bandage and stuck it to her skin before noticing that Jhin and Nene were intently watching her every move. She covered her left shoulder in a fluster. "S-seriously! Knock it off! You two aren't allowed to look. It's embarrassing!"

She inhaled, gently using her right hand to block the faint light that spilled over from under the bandage.

"Okay, we're going to get out of this place, stat. And then once we're home safe, we'll scold Risyā. I can't believe she ran out ahead of us. We're having her treat us to barbecue as an apology."

"And Iska, too?"

"Of course!"

Unit 907 dashed up the stairs where the footsteps of the suppression squads echoed—launching themselves out of the Orelgan prison spire.

3

The flowers bloomed at night.

...Fireworks?

For a few short seconds, Iska felt as though he was hallucinating.

From the top floor of the hotel, he could see buildings illuminated by brilliant neon flashes. Against the inky sky, these

lights unfurled themselves over the city—radiating a brilliant red.

“...What is that?” Alice asked in a dry, husky voice.

At the same time, a gigantic pillar of fire blasted out from the ground, reaching the sky.

“What?”

“Was that an explosion...?!”

The two of them touched the glass wall with their hands, forgetting to even breathe as they stared in the direction of the fire.

It ceased, extinguishing the sparks in the air and the pillar of fire. Seeing a massive explosion disappearing at that speed, they instinctively knew it had to be an astral attack.

...Astral flames go out in a few dozen seconds.

...I'm not worried about the fire spreading, but something of that scale would definitely result in injuries.

And who had caused it?

If it was a blast within the Sovereignty, the first thing she would suspect was the Imperial army's destructive handiwork, but the flame was clearly created by astral power. The perpetrator had to be a mage.

“Orelgan...,” rasped Alice. “It's in the direction of the Orelgan prison spire. I'm certain of it.”

It couldn't be.

That was the place Iska had asked her about that day. Even in this state that housed many prisoners, that spire was home to the vilest of criminals.

“Salinger the Transcendental turned his blade on the then-queen.”

“That sorcerer attempted to become something greater than king.”

That was what she had told Iska—the sorcerer who had turned his blade on the queen thirty years prior was still confined in the deepest cell of the Orelgan prison spire.

“It's an emergency!” Followed by two small knocks.

The door flew open before her mistress could answer, and the attendant in uniform burst into the room.

“I've confirmed there was an explosion at Orelgan. In addition, we've received reports that a large hole that's spewing debris has formed on those grounds.”

“I saw the explosion.”

“...A prisoner has escaped.” The attendant’s lips trembled as she relayed the message. “The first report from the guards of the prison spire has come in. A tremendous roar came from *that* sorcerer’s—Salinger’s solitary cell.”

“Come again?”

“We are just receiving communications from the suppression squad on the scene.”

“Hurry, Rin! If that sorcerer escapes...he’ll go after my mother’s *astral power* next!”

Go after her astral power? Iska couldn’t ask the girl next to him to clarify.

He felt a sense of urgency wash over him, making him hold his tongue as he watched Alice’s face lose its composure.

“I’ll head over.”

“B-but, Lady Alice! His power...is dangerous.”

“Is there anyone else who can do this? The suppression squad will barely stand a chance against that man. You know about the battle from thirty years ago.”

“.....”

“Rin, go to the first floor. Prepare the car as soon as possible.”

“...As you wish.” The attendant didn’t say anything further, bowing before sprinting through the door and dashing down the hall as fast as an arrow.

They were once again alone together in the room.

Alice had been watching Rin take her leave and sighed under her breath. “You heard me. I’m heading over to that prison spire now.”

“And I don’t suppose you can tell an Imperial soldier any more?”

“Yes, because you’re the enemy.” She ran her fingers through her prized golden hair, offering him a weak smile...a self-deprecating smile. “But it makes me wonder... I bet I would have so much more peace of mind if only I could tell you everything.”

“...”

“Hey, Iska...”

And with her supple lips, she wove together a question.

“If...I asked you to lend me your strength...”

“Would you answer my request?”

She asked between haggard breaths.

Or had that just been Aliceliese inhaling and exhaling? Maybe he'd imagined it. Her voice had been that faint.

"...No. I'm sorry. Forget it." Alice pressed her lips together. "It's nothing more than a prisoner managing to get out of his cell. We only need to capture him again. I'll be right back."

And then she turned her back to him, starting to walk.

".....I forgot something." She marched through the living room and into the bedroom in the back.

When she returned, she held a brand-new handkerchief, and at a glance, it was easy to see that it was a high-quality design and made from fine fabric.

"I wonder if you remember?"

"What happened to my handkerchief? I gave you mine after you soaked through your own."

"...That one is sopping wet, too."

"You're crying way too much!"

It had happened at the opera house in the neutral city of Ain.

There was no way he would ever forget—that he had lent his handkerchief to a girl sitting next to him and that the girl had turned out to be Alice herself.

"You must think it's impolite of me to return this to you now, but I want to give it to you while Rin isn't here. Because the one you lent me...well...I got it dirty. I'm sorry I had to get you a new one. It might not suit your tastes." She placed the handkerchief folded into quarters on the table. "I'll put it here. If you don't like it, just leave it. But I hope you'll take it with you."

Could she have been embarrassed? She spoke quickly as she left him and tried to keep from meeting his eyes.

"See you, Iska."

The Sovereign princess turned away and was soon out of the room.

In that time, Iska hadn't been able to conjure a single thing worth saying.

Everything had happened too fast.

From this explosion in the middle of the night to the sorcerer and inmate Salinger escaping from the prison spire. Rin and Alice

were obviously not their usual selves.

...What is he? That transcendental? Salinger? Why did Alice have that expression on her face?

...Just what is going on?

A common Imperial soldier had no way of knowing.

Even if he tried to speculate, he possessed only bits and pieces of information. There were too many empty spaces he needed to fill to put the puzzle together.

“Damn it! And in the afternoon, Rin said that someone had slipped past their border guards. Is that related?!”

They had spotted suspicious groups in Alcatraz in the morning.

And a jailbreak had occurred in the middle of the night. The timing was too perfect for it to have just been a coincidence.

“Ugh, really. Someone just tell me alre...ady...?” He used all the strength he had to yank at his handcuffs.

But of course, he knew he couldn’t tear them apart. The reason he’d whipped around, pulling at his chain, was because he’d heard a familiar electronic noise coming from the other side of the living room.

It was the Imperial communications device.

When he had been drugged and taken, Rin had confiscated it from him. It should have been turned off. However, the sound indicating an incoming call blared in the living room.

“Captain?! You’re kidding!”

He had no time to think over why it was happening, instead decisively lunging in the direction of the communications device before it cut off—which meant making his way toward the bedroom in the back with his hands still bound.

To Alice’s bedroom.

The bed she had slept in the night before was there. It was easily big enough for two adults.

Her sweet smell faintly lingered in the air.

He felt guilty sneaking into a girl’s bedroom at her delicate age, but he didn’t have time to hesitate.

“Where are you, communications device? Where is that coming from...?”

The pillows. It was immediately next to one that Alice must have used. The device lit up to indicate it was receiving a call.

...But why would she leave it conspicuously on top of her pillow?

...If she wanted to keep it from me, wouldn’t she hide it somewhere I

couldn't find it?

Iska's communications device had been left behind on Alice's pillow.

It was almost as if...a young child had been cradling their favorite doll in their sleep.

"...Alice?" He called out the name of the girl who had left the room.

But he lost his train of thought as the communications device rang loudly.

"Ah, right, the call!"

"....."

"Um...!"

".....Iska?" It was a cute and gentle voice. Though it sounded like a very young girl, he knew it was a respectable Imperial captain.

"Captain Mismis! It's me; it's Iska!"

"Iska?! We did it. We finally got through. See, you two?!"

"All right, just get to the point already! It took all we had to stop the suppression squad! Hey, Nene, throw an anti-astral power grenade over there!" shouted Jhin.

"Leave it to me!"

There was the sound of a gunshot and roaring flames.

"Iska, what's going on over there?!" asked the captain.

"I honestly have no idea. It's just that no one is around me. I'm being held captive on the top floor of a hotel."

"And the Ice Calamity Witch?"

"She left. On her way to the Orelgan prison spire... Oh, wait. I should tell you where I am—"

The thirteenth state—Alcatroz.

First, he needed to explain that he had been held captive here. His head couldn't keep up with all these new developments, but at least he could tell them about where he was.

"Orelgan? Uh, but that's where we are right now."

"...Excuse me?" He almost dropped the communications device.

All the remaining members of his unit were gathered in the thirteenth state, and on top of that, they were at the prison spire that had exploded just a moment ago?

What did it mean?

What coincidences had to have happened to lead them to this situation?

"Jhin, Nene, this is bad! The Ice Calamity Witch is heading to our location! That's what Iska just said!"

"Wait, Captain! Was the explosion at the prison spire, you guys?"

"No, we just got caught up in it. We came to look for you, but it turned out you weren't the one we were looking for, and then... Ugh, seriously, switch with me, Jhin!"

"Hey, Iska," started the silver-haired sniper. "We can tell each other our life stories later. Right now, we need to figure out how to meet back up. I'm going to ask you straight up: Can you get to us?"

"...It might be hard. I've got handcuffs on, so I think I'd get caught before even getting out of the hotel."

"So you're a prisoner." Iska heard a *tsk* come over the device, which must have meant the ever-composed sniper was starting to show his impatience.

"And you, Jhin? Could you get to me?"

"It'll take a while for us to get out. We're on the uppermost floor of the underground prison spire. There are suppression squads all over the place, so we're dead in the water."

In contrast to the other three members of Unit 907, Iska was alone.

Just as Jhin had said, in order to meet up, it certainly would be easier for Iska to head over to them.

"Iska, I'm gonna ask you again. You're alone on the top floor of the hotel. That means if you can just get the handcuffs off, you can escape. Do you think you can tear those things off?"

"If I could, I would have already." He reexamined the heaviness of the steel handcuffs around his wrists. In order to break them, he needed a device that could slice through metal, but it wasn't as though something like that would be conveniently nearby.

"All I have is the communications device. I have it in my hand and..."

And what else?

What could take off his handcuffs? A wire? Tweezers? Could he bend something until it was in the shape of a key and jimmy the lock on the handcuffs? Impossible. The handcuffs from this time period didn't rely on simple locking mechanisms.

...No.

.....Wait.

Wasn't he forgetting something incredibly important?

"I want to give it to you while Rin isn't here."

"I'll put it here. If you don't like it, just leave it. But I hope you'll take it with you."

It was just a single memory.

Her parting words bubbled up from the corner of his mind.

".....Alice?"

"Iska? Hey, Iska, what's going on?!"

He was silent in response. Because his mind was blank. He couldn't say anything.

Plus, it was just speculation. It was a hollow idea, and he knew that it was an expectation that was too convenient to be true.

But...why had she given it to him now? There was an explanation for her behavior.

"She couldn't have—" Iska let out in a choked voice as he started to sprint.

He launched himself into the living room. On the table in the middle, the thing that Alice had left was still there.

The handkerchief she had returned.

It had happened when they had met in the opera hall in Ain.

There was no way he would forget. That was because it was the first time he and Alice had met other than on the battlefield.

"...She couldn't have."

With his hands bound by handcuffs, with trembling fingers... Iska picked up the new handkerchief. Mind blank, he stopped breathing. He almost felt as though he was praying as he unfolded the handkerchief...

Thump. A small key slipped into his palm.

The key to his handcuffs.

"Uh...ha-ha...I see... I'm so stupid... Why didn't I notice...?"

He raised his handcuffs, letting them clatter together as he held his forehead.

...I'm so stupid.

...Why didn't I realize this immediately?!

Alice had been looking for a chance to release him.

Ever since the beginning. Nothing had gone the way she had hoped. She wanted to settle things on the battlefield. Hadn't she

been saying that herself this whole time?

"I promise I'll release you as soon as a suitable negotiation has been reached."

In which case...what would the *conditions* have been? What had Alice wanted out of it?

"If...I asked you to lend me your strength..."

"Would you answer my request?"

It was so obvious.

If he couldn't answer that question, then he didn't have the right to call himself her rival.

...If those are the conditions, then...

...If that's what you want, then I've got to comply!

The handcuffs clanged as they came off.

He didn't even look at the handcuffs that dropped to the ground as he quickly returned to the bedroom. He picked up the communications device he had left.

"Jhin."

"Iska?"

"I'm heading over to you right now. Let's meet at Orelgan."

"What? Wait, but your handcuffs...?!" asked Jhin, startled.

"I figured it out. Also, I want you to tell Captain Mismis: Get out of there fast. And be careful. The suppression squads aren't the ones you have to be worried about," he answered the sniper in a clipped tone. "A sorcerer imprisoned in that spire escaped."

"...What do you mean?"

"We can go into details later. I'm heading over there right now."

He hung up.

In the dimly lit bedroom, Iska took a small breath.

"The transcendental sorcerer, huh?"

The man who had bared his fangs at the then-queen. Iska couldn't even imagine what kind of person would do that.

"I'll be there right away. It'll be okay."

Who exactly was he trying to assure? After Iska turned his unconscious desires that he did not understand into words, he left the room.

"If my opponent is an astral mage, I don't intend to lose—no matter who they are."

The heart of the thirteenth state, Alcatroz.

Though it was the middle of the night, the sidewalk was overflowing with a din of people. There had been an explosion at the Orelgan prison spire. Intermittent rumbles continued to wrack the ground, and there had even been some who witnessed the telltale light of an astral attack.

Concealing himself in the crowd, Iska continued to sprint down the main street.

“Salinger, the transcendental sorcerer... If he escapes, he’ll go after the astral power of the queen? What does that mean...?!”

As he dashed down the street, he was kicking himself with regret. Iska hadn’t heard Salinger’s name before, finding out about him only from Alice’s anecdote that he’d once attempted an attack on the queen.

...The Nebulis Sovereignty isn’t a monolith.

...There are those who oppose the royal family, and Salinger is one of them. Is that what this means?

Eventually, the wave of people thinned out.

“Is the spire on fire?!”

He had caught sight of the gnarled prison spire, ringed by an iron fence. The structure itself was engulfed in roaring red flames. A fiery red inferno blotted out the entire night sky.

Iska stared as he watched the flames that showed no signs of dying down.

“This isn’t astral flame. Is it an actual fire? Where are...Captain Mismis and the others?!”

He also knew that Alice and Rin should have arrived somewhere on the grounds by now. That said, it would probably be best for him to meet up with the captain and his other colleagues first. When Iska had communicated with Jhin earlier, the three other members of Unit 907 had still been under the prison spire.

“Captain Mismis, Jhin, and Nene... Where are they...?!”

“Iska?!” called out a voice from the grounds.

With the prison spire rising in the background, he noticed his adorable captain cutting through the grass—dressed in her personal clothes in place of her combat uniform. It must have been a disguise. Normally tied back, her hair was down, and she looked just a little more grown-up than usual.

And in her arms, she was holding one black and one white astral sword close to her chest.

“Captain Mismis!”

“Waaaaaaah! Iska, is it really you?!”

“Ah?”

As though forgetting the situation unfolding around them, his superior immediately ran over and leaped onto him. She rubbed her cheeks, still smeared with soot, into Iska’s chest as hard as she could.

“I’m so glad... I-I’m so sorry, Iska. If I had been better...”

“N-not at all! That was completely my fault!”

He was the one who had completely let down his guard and drank the drugged juice—that had been his own blunder. Even if he had been distracted by other things.

“Captain, where are the others?”

“Ahhh, Captain Mismis! You’re hogging Iska all to yourself again!”

He heard the familiar high-pitched squeal of a girl.

After spotting Iska and Mismis in each other’s arms, a girl with a ponytail trotted over, gripping a stun gun in both hands.

“Seriously, Captain, that’s so unfair! C’mon, move. Iska belongs to everyone!”

“I’m the one who found him!”

“Could you guys shut up for a bit?” Jhin walked quietly through the lawn. He had made an appearance last because he had been acting as the anchor as they escaped from the prison spire.

“This has been one huge pain after another.” The young man with silver hair shrugged as he looked at Iska. “One minute you’re captured, and then a minute later, you’ve escaped. I can’t keep up.”

“Uh...I know. I’m sorry.” Iska lowered his head as an apology to the three of them.

He could only imagine what the unit had gone through to be there. He didn’t have the luxury of asking them about it, but he was sure it hadn’t been easy.

“Well, don’t worry about it. First off, we’re getting out of here. If we hang around, we’ll get caught up in the firestorm.” Jhin jerked his chin toward the iron fence behind him.

The grass around the spire had caught on fire, and the embers were rising, turning the air itself red. It was only a matter of time until the blaze spread past the grounds.

"We're heading out."

"Oh, wait, Jhin! Captain and Nene, you too."

"What?"

"...Captain, can I have those astral swords?" He took the pair of swords from her. Although they had been separated for only a few days, he couldn't help feeling that the sturdiness of the sheaths had a nostalgic quality to them.

"....." There was still something he needed to do with these swords in the prison spire.

He hadn't met Alice's "conditions." Yet.

"Captain, I'm sorry, but would you let me have fifteen minutes?"

"Come again?"

"Down that main road over there—the largest hotel you can see is where I was held prisoner. Could you wait for me behind it? I'll follow right after."

"Wha—?! W-wait, Iska?!"

His target was the Orelgan prison spire.

Iska hardened his resolve as he leaped through the rising flames and smoke to enter the building.

5

A short time earlier...

At the heart of the thirteenth state, Alcatroz.

"...Rin, try to be as fast as possible."

A small car raced through the streets.

While watching the buildings fly past, Alice muttered, "It would be a serious matter if that sorcerer was to wreak havoc in this place."

"Yes. That said, the residents who are outside should be taking refuge inside the buildings. It would be unbelievably dangerous to run into an escaped inmate, after all."

Though the Empire indiscriminately feared astral mages as monsters, one and all, the reality was that only a handful possessed notably strong astral powers. Most would be able to create a small breeze at best. Though this was called the Paradise of Witches, most of its residents were far from dangerous or terrifying. On the other

hand, the inmates of the prison spires were kept there because they had committed crimes with their strong astral power.

"This is the worst-case scenario of an inmate escaping. This moment will go down as a black mark on the Sovereignty's history," Rin said.

"No, it won't," Alice responded in a hardened tone. "I'll go out and face him. I just need to lock the inmate back up in a cell again. That'll be the end of that."

"And I will be there to assist. If the sorcerer goes into hiding, I imagine it'll be hard to pursue him. I'm sure he will appear again at the royal palace."

"Yes. That's why we need to hurry, Rin."

The car peeled away, going way beyond the speed limit.

...I'm facing the sorcerer Salinger.

...The man who attacked the royal palace and reached the queen.

A terrible criminal who had turned on the previous ruler.

As far as Alice knew, it was unprecedented in all the history of the Sovereignty for anyone outside the royal palace to reach the queen. One of the select few who was an exception to that was Salinger.

Naturally, Rin and Alice had been told about his abilities.

"My mother told me about it. Thirty years ago, *he raided the royal palace, seeking Nebulis VII's astral power.*"

"Yes, and the one who stopped him was none other than our current queen."

The then-queen, Nebulis VII, and the current queen, Nebulis IIX, had made their move. Of course, they were extremely cautious of the man who had posed such a dire threat to their power.

"Lady Alice, please be careful."

"No need to worry," Alice answered with a calm smile. "If it's a head-on battle, I won't lose. My mother and her predecessor already defeated him once in the past. I wonder what it will be like."

If that had been enough to hold him down... then she definitely wouldn't lose.

After all, the full strength of the Ice Calamity Witch Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX had already surpassed the current queen's. She knew saying that would be perceived by others as snubbing her mother, the queen. Which was why Alice would never make the claim herself, though it would be a different story if the current Nebulis IIX was to declare it to be true.

...Yes, that's right. I won't fear Salinger the Transcendental.

...I'm not scared to battle him. I'm scared of him escaping at the end of the battle.

She wasn't uncertain of herself. Given the chance, that man would inevitably attack the Sovereignty royal palace again. That meant there was a danger that he would attack her mother next.

"I can see it, Lady Alice."

"Yes, it's almost time." Alice snapped her face up, listening to the voice in the driver's seat.

Crack. In that moment, the reinforced glass pane of the car cracked in front of her eyes, creating a depression of half an inch.

"A bullet?! Is it Imperial gunfire?!"

"What did you say...?"

"Lady Alice, get down!"

They were suddenly swiveling all over the place. Rin gripped the steering wheel, changing their course.

"They're aiming for this car. We need to get out!"

"I know!"

Rin escaped through the right-side door of the driver's seat, while Alice leaped out of the left door in the back seat.

The iron fencing had been blown away by force.

The twisted door retained no semblance of its original form.

And then there was the raging firestorm.

The flames lapped at the grass, showing no signs of extinguishing as Alice watched it.

...This isn't astral flame. But if it's not a normal fire, then could it be due to an incendiary explosive?

...Is this the work of the Imperial military?!

The timing was just too on the nose.

She couldn't imagine that the sorcerer Salinger's escape was unrelated.

"But why is the Empire doing this? Salinger is a traitor to our country. The Empire shouldn't know anything about him..."

Her vision was clouded by flames and black smoke.

Because of the dense smoke and haze, visibility was poor. Rin was right beside her, but she would most certainly have disappeared from view if they took a few steps away from each other.

What about the prison spire?

The main structure was so obstructed by a wall of flames and

smoke that she didn't know what had become of it.

But the most troubling issue was the ensuing mayhem.

The people running, streaming before Alice's eyes, were all shouting about something...

"Calling the prison-spire management room... The cell on the underground eleventh floor has been destroyed! The sorcerer Salinger has been seen escaping."

"Who cares?! Where are the firefighters?!"

"Don't hang around here! Get away—hurry! There are Imperial forces here!"

"It's possible the other prisoners have escaped as well. There were reports of a small-scale battle breaking out on the underground second and third floors and—"

The command structure is in confusion.

It was likely that none of the people rushing around understood the situation in its entirety. Each disparate group wasn't even able to coordinate among themselves, and they were all divided.

No, they had *been* divided.

"...We've been had." Rin clenched her hand into a fist. "It seems this wasn't just about Salinger's escape. For so much disorder to occur all at once..."

One, Salinger had suddenly disappeared from his underground solitary cell.

Two, Imperial units had unexpectedly infiltrated the state.

Three, there was a chance that prisoners other than Salinger had escaped from the underground prison.

Four, the local commanders had completely lost control of the situation.

Because all this had occurred at the same time, the Sovereignty hadn't been able to maintain order.

...If things keep going like this, we'll lose Salinger.

...It's not just that. We won't be able to stem the large number of escapees from getting out or stop the Empire's attack.

Were they invading Alcatroz?

No, the Empire was after the Nebulis Sovereignty central state. They had likely made the Sovereignty turn its attention to this place, fully intent on infiltrating the palace while everyone's focus was diverted by the chaos.

If Alice were on the other side, she would have hatched the same plan.

This wasn't just about extinguishing the prison fire. If she failed to get the situation under control, there was a possibility this chaos would engulf the entire Sovereignty.

...If that happens, the people will lose trust in my mother.

...That is exactly what the Empire is after.

This wouldn't just end with her capturing Salinger. As a princess of this nation, she needed to take a stand against the disorder that was unfolding right before her eyes.

"Fine. I'll take care of everything. That's what a princess does, right?" she asked herself.

She raised her right hand before making a single declaration: "QUIET!"

The space around the Orelgan prison spire froze in place.

That wasn't a metaphor.

The prison grounds were instantly chilled as if they had been transported to the middle of a glacier.

A breeze blew up a gust of snow, whipping it around and making the grass underfoot turn faintly white. Even the raging fire lost some of its vigor, batting back the cold air.

"Know your place! All of you here know who this is!" bellowed Rin. Everyone stopped and turned around.

The source of the terrific chill...was the princess with flaxen hair, standing in front of the ice pillar that craned toward the heavens above. One look, and they doubted their eyes.

"Princess Aliceliese?!"

"Wh-why are you here...? N-no, I mean...what an honor it is to be graced by your presence!"

The suppression squads dropped to their knees and bowed their heads as fast as they could. She responded with a smile.

"I will be taking command here. I wonder if you would be so kind as to follow my lead?"

There was no way anyone would object.

As a descendant of the Founder, Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX—the famous princess known as the Sovereignty's trump card against the Imperial army—had herself just said she would take command, after all.

She was strong, majestic, and utterly captivating.

The princess brimming with charisma brought down her hand.

“On my name as the second princess Aliceliese, I will use the queen’s right of absolute command as her proxy. All units are to hereby report to me. I will lead the way!”

She gave four orders.

For the prison suppression squads to pursue the sorcerer Salinger.

For the prison guards to capture the other escapees.

For the astral mage corps to mount a counterattack on the Imperial infiltrators.

For the city police to pacify the panicking citizenry.

Alice commanded them all.

...Now we’ve stopped the confusion from spreading throughout Alcatroz.

...At the same time, this was a double-edged sword.

With this, Alice couldn’t leave this place anymore.

She was sure Salinger wouldn’t be defeated, even with all the strength of the suppression squads put together.

“Rin.”

“I understand,” said the attendant who accompanied her.

“There is no time. I know it will be a dangerous role, but you’re the only one who can do it. I believe the suppression squads will not be able to stop him.”

“As you wish. Certainly.” After she bowed, Rin ran in the direction of the prison spire.

Alice watched her go as though she was praying.

“—Gh.” Alice silently gritted her teeth.

Salinger was the one who had been driven back through the cooperation of the successive queens. He was incredibly dangerous. That was exactly why she originally was the one who should have fought him.

...It’s not that I don’t believe in Rin. She’s strong.

...But even if I do trust her to do this, I can’t get these nerves to go away.

Earlier, she had gotten a bad feeling about how events were developing. This was the exact scenario she had feared most—winding up in a situation where she’d be unable to move freely, leaving Rin to deal with Salinger by herself.

That was exactly why she had asked for assistance from *him*.

"If...I asked you to lend me your strength..."

"Would you answer my request?"

If he would only help her. How much peace of mind would it have granted her?

When she had thought that, Alice's lips had unconsciously continued to say the words that were incompatible with her position as a princess.

...I wonder if he misunderstood.

...I wasn't asking him to help me because I didn't think I could win against Salinger.

No, what was done was done.

Now all she could do was pour her whole body and soul into her current task. She would command everyone as capably as she could and continue to pray that Rin would be safe.

"Quickly! Prepare an emergency line to communicate the situation to the royal palace!"

Among the burning fires, Alice yelled after them.

"I will speak to the queen. Please hurry!"

6

The prison spire was fully engulfed in flames.

"...Sorcerer, show yourself!" Rin rasp-yelled as the embers and smoke cut through the air, carried on the wind as one.

The fire had flared up.

Although it had calmed momentarily after Alice unleashed her powers, the embers soon danced through the air once again, spreading the fire from one grassy patch to another.

"I wonder if the Imperial soldiers are hiding inside...?"

Visibility was bad. She couldn't tell whether anyone in front of her eyes was a fellow mage or an Imperial spy disguised as one.

"...And the firefighters."

If the firefighters came much later, the prison spire itself would burn down. In fact, if the fire spread beyond the prison spire, it would be catastrophic.

"Clod of earth, I beseech you." With Rin's command, the ground under the grass wriggled. "Stifle the fire!"

As though the ground had been overturned, chunks of earth

soared into the air and crashed down on the fire before her. Once it was covered with earth, she was certain the flame would go out.

Or it should have—except in midair, the flying earth pressed together to form a “shield,” returning to Rin’s hands.

It was an automatic defense, triggered by her astral power.

“An Imperial soldier?!”

Then came a gunshot.

The earthen shield in Rin’s hands stopped the large volume of gunfire suddenly directed at her. She was being sniped at from the shadows. Without that automatic defense, Rin would have found it incredibly difficult to avoid getting hit.

“I suppose you have no mercy for a witch, even if she’s a girl.”

The person was firing at anyone within the grounds—male or female. Though it was particularly ruthless to hide in the night and gun down targets indiscriminately, the Imperial soldiers had misunderstood a critical point.

“Aren’t you underestimating me?”

After all, she was an attendant of the royal family—in other words, one of the Astrals, the elites who served as royal palace guards—similar to the way the eleven Saint Disciples directly served the Lord.

The attendants who aided the Sovereignty’s princesses were first-class astral mages.

“When you shot at me, I figured out exactly where you were!”

The ground rumbled. From under the grass, a pitch-black crevice revealed itself. The crack in the ground opened its maw wide and attacked its mark...

...which was the Imperial unit that had hidden themselves behind the obscuring fire.

“Fall to the bowels of the earth.”

The bottom was a hundred yards down—an abyss where even the light of the sky could not reach. The Imperial soldiers who hadn’t been able to escape plunged to the bottom of the pit.

Most importantly, while the attack seemed brutal, it had almost no ability to injure or kill people. This astral technique held enemies captive and specialized in rendering them powerless.

“Don’t assume you escaped from death just yet, Imperial soldiers.”

They were on the grounds of a prison spire. There were more than enough cells to cage Imperial hostages. After cleaning

everything up, she could bring them out of the pit and take them captive.

“I have no business with foot soldiers right now. There’s something more pressing—”

Rustle. She felt the subtle presence of someone walking through the grass.

There is something different about this one.

An Imperial soldier would have charged, a prisoner would have scrambled, and a member of the suppression squads would have been chasing someone—but this person was in no hurry at all. Rin heard footsteps slowly making their way across the grounds.

This newcomer was composed and full of self-confidence.

Who was it?

Who could have kept their cool in this situation?

The red flames framed the approaching figure.

From the embers emerged a handsome man with white hair. He had a chiseled face with bold features: eyes long and tapered, and mouth curved in a comfortable smile.

He had a strange appearance, wearing a thick, long coat over his naked chest.

“.....” She had seen him before.

However, *it couldn’t be*. That man had been captured thirty years ago. If the reports that Rin had read were right, he should have been well into his twilight years.

So why? How could this powerful, young form of his be—?

“What a cold reception.”

It was Salinger the Transcendental.

The sorcerer infamous for turning on the royal family had just calmly appeared through the flames.

“I thought I’d be received with applause and cheers. And all I get is this little girl greeting me?”

“Salinger!” Rin did not hesitate as she flipped up her skirt, springing into movement without missing a beat.

She pulled out two daggers that were fastened to her thighs. Though she drew her weapons in one clean swipe, the man simply narrowed his eyes.

“Oh. A tiger in sheep’s skin. You may look a servant, but you act as though you know what you’re doing. It seems you’re not just some maid.”

“I have no intention of telling a criminal my name.”

This man was not only a threat to the royal palace but also to every astral mage in existence.

Salinger the Transcendental.

This sorcerer could *steal other people's astral powers* .

“You infiltrated the royal palace and tried to snatch the queen’s astral power, of all things! That deserves a fate worse than death!”

“.....”

“What is it, thief?”

“I’ve grown bored of this.” Salinger sighed dramatically. He had his hands stuck in the pockets of his coat. “Based on how you talk, I gather you’re from the royal palace. And the way you’re dressed... I see, you’re an attendant of the royal family—one of the Astrals.”

“And what of it?”



“Nobility dwells not in lineage but in ideals.’ I’ll show you.”

That was the logical statement that this sorcerer lived by.

He believed that the Nebulis Sovereignty’s throne should not have been chosen based on bloodline but on a meritocracy. It certainly sounded fine on the surface, but...

“Shut it, sorcerer,” Rin continued, murder dripping from her words. “Criminal! You who have stolen astral power from countless people! Your ideology is nothing but an excuse to justify your barbarism!”

“It’s not. This is merely ‘collection.’ I hate for it to be compared to theft.”

“What did you say?”

“Think of how a king collects taxes from his people. What is so wrong for the king of mages to collect astral power?” Salinger held his right hand to the sky, gesturing as though he was holding a heap of gold coins in his palm and gripping it tight. “Don’t you agree?”

“So you’re pretending to be a king? I can only see this as the vulgar fantasy of a single mage.”

“That’s right. Right now, *I’m just a king* .” Light appeared from his upheld palm.

It was weak enough that it disappeared into the shadows of the night. However, Rin knew this was the light of Water Mirror, the astral power that Salinger possessed.

“I will take all available power and transcend royalty.”

“What nonsense. There’s living proof that everything you claim is nothing but a bluff. Have you already forgotten those who defeated you at the royal palace?”

The one who had fought Salinger alongside the then-queen had been a teenage girl—Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX.

“Even if you were to attack the palace again, you’ll simply lose once more against the queen.”

“Ha! Me? Lose against that girl?” The alluring man guffawed. With one hand stuffed into his coat, he held the other to his forehead and leaned backward. His shoulders heaved as though he couldn’t help himself. “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That’s absurd. It’s only been thirty years. It seems history has distorted itself in that time.”

“...What?”

“I’ve never feared or paid any heed to that little girl back then or now.”

His voice cut through the sounds of the night—overpowering the gunshots, explosions, screams, bellows. This was despite the fact that at that very moment, Imperial soldiers and the astral mage corps were engaged in a brutal fight.

Salinger the Transcendental laughed without paying any mind to the battle being waged nearby. “She isn’t the one to fear in the Nebulis line. You haven’t even noticed *the true monster created by the Founder’s bloodline*. How pitiful.”

“Don’t get carried away, scum!” Rin’s cry rose above the raging fire. “You don’t deserve to even speak of the royal family. And the one who will become the ruler of the world has already been chosen. That’s my lady. You’re nothing more than a feeble shadow compared to her.”

“Oh? And what’s her name?”

“There’s no reason to tell you.” She brought her hand around her back. Her detachable skirt fluttered in the air as Rin ripped it off to reveal a knee-length one. “You’re going back to prison.”

Her dagger sliced through the air.

The blade glittered in the night, tearing through her skirt as it fluttered in the air, hurtling at the man’s thighs. If she scored a hit on his legs, he wouldn’t be able to run—sorcerer or not.

That blade stopped in midair.

“So you’ve trained with throwing knives. Great aim.” Salinger plucked the levitating blade out of the air. “Pulling off your clothes was just a distraction so you could hide your hands while you threw that dagger. You’re good for your age, maid.”

“So that was the astral power of wind.”

“You thought I *didn’t* have that?”

Of course. Salinger had the ability to take another’s astral power. By the time he had challenged Nebulis VII, he had already stolen more than one hundred. And he had chosen only strong ones.

That was the case now, too. He had used a strong wind as a barrier to stop the blades.

She couldn’t approach him without care. The techniques this man would employ were unknown and needed to be treated with caution.

“*Did you think I would be cautious?*”

“Hmm?”

“You think you can stop me by making me fear your astral powers? Is that what you were planning?” Rin launched herself off the ground.

With her precise, almost feline movements, it took her a mere three steps to close the distance. Her right hand was curled into a fist, while the left readied a dagger.

“The stronger the astral power, the larger the area of effect. Try using your power as much as you’d like, sorcerer. I’d enjoy watching you get consumed by your own attacks.”

“How impudent.”

The sorcerer opened his eyes wide.

She had been incredibly insolent, but despite that, Salinger’s eyes appeared incensed. His mouth drew back in a grin from his surprise and admiration.

This kind of close combat was the ideal approach to fighting him.

If Salinger tried to summon a powerful, raging wind at such close range, he’d also get caught up in it. But if he held back to avoid endangering himself, it would be weak enough that Rin would be able to neutralize it with her astral powers of earth.

“Ha-ha.”

She searched her chest pocket. Though she flashed her dagger in her left hand, her true attack would come from her other hand. With rigid fingers, Rin aimed a strike at the sorcerer’s neck.

Gshk. She heard a dull sound. Rin’s fingers dug not into his neck but the arm Salinger had suddenly swung out. He had pulled out the left hand that he had kept in his coat as a sign of his composure.

“So you can aim for the vitals without hesitation. I’d call that disrespectful...but it’s actually quite commendable.” The sorcerer leaped away as his left arm trickled blood.

His legs weren’t just strong. When Salinger retreated, the ground moved like a treadmill and increased his speed.

“Now then, maid, *how did you learn to battle mages?* ”

“.....”

“The Empire is the Sovereignty’s greatest enemy, so I’m sure you’re familiar with fighting Imperial soldiers... Shouldn’t you have no experience going up against fellow mages?”

There was virtually no reason for a mage to fight against another mage under normal circumstances.

Apart from Salinger, who had gone against the royal family,

most people would have found it incredibly difficult to engage in extremely close combat—even if it was the most optimal way to fight.

“Either you possess incredible talent or you had a worthy teacher.”

“I have no obligation to respond.” Rather, she didn’t *want* to respond.

She advanced upon the mage once again with the force of a wild animal. Her form, harsh yet refined, deviated from all the other armed techniques she’d previously acquired...

...because they were the battling techniques of the Imperial swordsman Iska.

This was the way Iska had challenged Alice. But Rin would rather choke than admit she was mirroring his moves—even though from the bottom of her heart, she respected his strength.

“Earth, I beseech you.” Rin snapped her fingers. “Crush this man. Ruin his unseemly face.”

The ground under Salinger’s feet started to swell, gathering and forming into a humanoid shape. It towered over the sorcerer, blocking him in.

“A golem? I see, so you’re an astral mage of earth.”

“Crush him.”

“Too bad it’s so frail.”

The golem swung down its fist—only for Salinger to intercept the attack with his palm. When they made contact, the handsome man let loose a terrific flash of light from his right hand.

It was the astral power of lightning—the most brutal of attacks that could explode and scatter all that it touched, pulsing with more than enough energy to obliterate the golem. And yet, the one who scowled was the sorcerer.

“*Tch*. This isn’t just made of dirt... You used clay from deep underground!”

The golem blew apart, flinging debris that clung to Salinger’s limbs, smearing his body with muddy clay that wouldn’t be easy to remove.

The earth had severely limited his movements.

“That look suits a thief like you.”

“...Did you really think you managed to get one over me?” Salinger cast away the clods that had bound to his body, slinging them through the air and pelting Rin. “This is what a true earth-

type is like.”

“What?!” She had lost control of the dirt. No, it was something else. Were her powers being hijacked? She was losing connection with the ground. “It couldn’t be...?!”

“Looks like my power is greater. That’s all it is.” The astral crest of the Water Mirror glowed on his palm.

To steal astral power, Salinger had to touch their crests together—the longer they were in contact, the more power would be transferred. At most, he had the potential to steal as much as half. Consequently, his stolen power could only be half as strong as the original.

And yet, Rin had been pushed back.

“My astral power of earth comes from a purebred. Yours can’t even dream of competing against it.”

“...Are you saying you stole it from the royal family?!”

The royal family were the descendants of the first Nebulis who had established the country. To commit such a crime against the bloodline of the Founder was nothing less than blasphemy.

“**SALINGEEEEEEEEER!** You could die a thousand times and still come short of atoning for your crimes!”

“Don’t raise your voice at me!” he snapped. “You think the royal family has done any good? Yeah, right. I can admit that the Founder had a considerable list of accomplishments, but *look* at the current royal family. A bunch of louts who are content to simply rest on their laurels without even trying to elevate their natural-born powers.”

“...—Agh.”

“That’s why I say I will surpass the royalty.” The handsome sorcerer raised both hands, as though beckoning the sky to come closer, and stared up at the heavens. “I have one more announcement.”

There was an impact—the resulting force nearly split her eardrums, ripping through her entire body as though she’d been whipped, and caused her to momentarily black out. When she came to her senses, Rin found herself facedown on the grass. Her clothes were shredded and all the muscles in her body, aching.

“.....—Gh...hrgh...?!” Her throat clogged with globs of spit, mixing in with the metallic taste of blood.

What happened? What had just hit her? Rin hadn’t peeled her eyes away from Salinger for even a moment, concentrating with all

her might. And yet, she had no idea how he had managed to attack her.

“—Do you—maid—?”

With her ears ringing, she couldn't even make out what he was saying.

Wait. My ears are ringing? She knew of an astral power with a similar skill.

“...It was.....sound...”

“That's—ri—” The sorcerer chuckled, shoving his hands into his coat once again. “I just launched the largest sound wave possible. Even if you protected yourself with an earthen wall, the shock wave would have passed right through it—something that earth-types can't properly defend against.”

“.....Ugh...”

“What? That's it? On a scale of zero to a hundred, I only showed you a five or a six.”

“—Nh?!” As she lay in a disheveled heap, Rin couldn't stop her full-body tremors.

To think their powers differed so greatly...! She didn't intend to accept this man's words at face value, but it was true that she hadn't seen the extent of his powers just yet.

“...Sa...lin...”

“Boring. This is like making sport of a cat or dog.” He sighed. That was Salinger's candid way of showing his contempt. “But there's no need for discouragement. Anyone would face the same fate after going up against me. You chose the wrong person to pick a fight with.”

“.....”

“Glaring at me while you're in such a state? Disappear from my sight.”

It was Roaring Song—the astral technique Salinger had once stolen from a purebred—an auditory tsunami that was closing in on the girl collapsed on the ground, about to crash over her...

“Just this once...”

The roaring waves had been severed in two—right before they could reach her.

“...Impossible.” The transcendental sorcerer balked in shock.

The sound wave was both invisible to the naked eye and incredibly massive, making it virtually impossible to evade, much less detect its approach.

And yet, it had been cut down with a single stroke by a swordsman who had appeared with the wind.

“Are you all right?”

“.....Imperial swordsman...you’re...?!” From behind, Rin could hear a voice. Craning her neck as far as it would go in her current condition brought into view a boy with a pair of astral swords.

“Just this once...”

The Saint Disciple, the swordsman, the captive—Iska was standing right there.

“...I’ll lend you a hand. This guy is Alice’s enemy, right?”

CHAPTER 5



The Sorcerer and the Berserker

1

The Orelgan prison spire.

It was the detention center that stood in the thirteenth state, Alcatroz, tasked with holding the most atrocious of criminals. Its grounds were currently engulfed in a mixture of black and red—dense clouds of smoke and hot embers of the Empire’s incendiary weapons.

Hearing the crackling flames mingling with the snapping of Imperial gunshots and shouts of the astral mage corps took no effort.

“...Imperial swordsman?” Alice’s attendant had been hit hard by a powerful sound wave, and it took her all just to stay conscious. Her lips barely moved. “Are you saying that...knowing full well... who this sorcerer is...?! This is the man who turned on the royal family...”

“If I don’t, I can’t go back to the Empire.”

“...What?”

He could tell from Rin’s reaction that Alice had been acting alone to hide the key in the handkerchief. That decision must have caused Alice great anguish—to keep her attendant in the dark about her covert plan.

“I want you to promise me something,” Iska started.

How he had managed to get off the handcuffs was a secret between Alice and him. At the moment, Iska needed to tell Rin something else.

“I’ll defeat him. In exchange—as the condition for my release—you must promise that you won’t interfere while my unit and I return to the border. I don’t see Alice anywhere, but I’m guessing she’s close by, right?”

Rin was silent.

"I assume we have an understanding."

"I—I haven't said anything yet...!"

"If you were against it, you would've said something."

"I don't get it," snarled the sorcerer, his booming tone disrupting the very air as Rin fumbled to find her words. "An Imperial soldier? I don't understand why someone from the Empire would protect a witch. And why are you challenging me? Answer me..." He shook his head in irritation.

Illuminated by the blue moon, Salinger the Transcendental snapped his fingers. "Never mind. There's no use in asking. Be gone."

The air around Rin and Iska contorted—the cause being the explosively widening shock wave hurtling at Iska from behind. With the intensity of a gale, the wave dashed everything it touched.

"A wave?"

It took only one sweep of Iska's astral blade to slice the incoming attack in two. The wave split the same way that one would part the sea, crashing past them on either side instead of swallowing Iska and Rin as intended.

"Hmm..."

He sliced through sound. The sorcerer did not move in the slightest, cocking his eyebrow slightly.

"Roaring Song. Others have defended against it in the past, but I've never seen it physically cut in two. You there, swordsman, what kind of trick did you use?"

"There's nothing special about me. It's the power of the astral swords."

"...Astral swords?" An eyebrow scrunched up. But he immediately shrugged in an exaggerated manner and responded with a fearless smile. "Don't play dumb with me. I'm not asking about the swords but you. Roaring Song is an invisible, destructive energy, which means this outcome has nothing to do with your weapons. Wouldn't you say it's all about skill?"

Humans couldn't see *sound*. Iska shouldn't have been able to hit it with his sword: That was inconceivable. By the time he would have registered the sound, the shock wave should have already blasted his whole body away.

"It's invisible, but right now, there's an exception to the rule."

"...Because of the swaying flames?!" The one who opened her

eyes wide was the girl on the ground.

Why hadn't she noticed it before? They were on the grounds of the prison spire, surrounded by flames that the Imperial military had created. Motes of fire were leaping from place to place.

And Iska had noticed the way they moved.

"The fire suddenly went out. I knew there had to be something there."

"...Imperial soldier... You have quite a talent for scanning your surroundings, huh? For you to—"

"It wasn't as though I noticed it from the very start." Iska's swordsmanship had nothing to do with talent. Or at the very least, it wasn't as though he was born gifted.

He had drilled himself until it was muscle memory. Over the years, he had spent countless hours devoting himself to mastering his craft. It was his unrelenting focus on the fundamentals that raised his abilities with the sword to levels where no one could hope to equal him.

"Either you're an acrobat or it was a miracle. Either it's coincidence or talent." Salinger was illuminated by the blue glow of the moon as he lifted one of his hands. It was his right hand bearing the crest of Water Mirror. "In that case, it'll be fun to see what you can do. Now, swordsman, how many more times can you survive? If you can get to three, I'll acknowledge you are a miracle maker."

"Imperial soldier!" Rin hollered. "Don't lose focus. He isn't a sound-type mage. That's just one of the many powers he's stolen!"

"—Gh."

"He is actually a Water Mirr—...!"

The air shattered as an explosion blew the immobilized maid back.

"Rin?!"

"Don't get in the way, maid. I'm having my fun with the swordsman right now."

It wasn't a sound wave. The flames around them hadn't been disturbed at all, meaning the air in front of her eyes had simply exploded.

"—Ngh." Iska had been ready to sprint toward her when he stopped in his tracks, kicking off the ground sideways. A moment later, the air surrounding the area where he had been detonated without warning.

"Stellar reflexes. How did you figure that one out?"

“By instinct.”

“That’s what I figured. But that has its limits. You can’t hold out.”

“Hold out? No, that’s not what I need to do.” Iska leaped.

It was Salinger’s turn to freeze.

“It’ll be over soon.”

“...Why, you?!” Salinger balked.

Iska moved fast enough to leave an afterimage, tearing through the air streaming with soot as he closed the two yards between them. He was a step and a swing of the sword away. An instant more was all he needed to be in range to end it.

It was kill or be killed.

With an enemy that was as strong as a purebred, Iska didn’t think he could handle all the astral attacks the sorcerer could bring to bear—he’d be expecting to get away with avoiding just two. Before the third could be unleashed, he needed to charge in and end the battle.

“You’re a beast in the skin of a swordsman!” Salinger shrieked.

The tip of Iska’s sword grazed past the sorcerer’s nose. Salinger had used a wind barrier—a gale coming in from the side had pushed Iska back, knocking the swordsman off-balance.

“Ha-ha, that nearly scared me to death.”

“...Did you know it was coming?” Iska pulled back the sword and glared at the man with white hair who leaped away.

A wind barrier.

What was surprising was the speed at which it had been invoked. Salinger definitely wouldn’t have been able to summon it in time if he’d waited until Iska stepped forward. Iska’s victory would have been assured the moment he got close enough to deliver the death blow.

But this man had prepared that invocation beforehand.

...Though he acts with the confidence that he can use overwhelming astral power to crush people, he’s actually a tactician who thinks two or three steps ahead.

This man wasn’t looking down on Iska.

Though he flaunted that he was above a mere swordsman, Iska could tell Salinger was prudent and incredibly calculating.

“What terrifying physical strength. But you let the opportunity of a lifetime go by. Your blade will not reach me a second time.”

“I agree.” Iska reversed the grip of his right, black astral sword.

He took a breath. Suddenly, the blades of grass started to whip around, and Iska once again launched himself off the ground.

"I won't let you use the same trick. This time, I'll cut through the barrier."

"Crawl, you beast."

The ground under Iska's feet opened up, revealing something more than a crevice—it was a rift. Centered around the swordsman, a gravitational field had appeared, drawing in everything around him for a ten-yard radius and crushing it with incredible force.

"It's a gravitational zone that would even bring down a dragon flying through the skies. And as for humans—"

"There is no such thing as an astral attack that can't be cut."

Iska's sword glinted as it traced an arc through the air. Moments later, the gravitational area was dispelled with a dry sound.

He hadn't just swung at random.

His long sword had cut through the seam of the attack with mechanical precision.

If he had been even a hairbreadth off target...if he had been a moment too late...he would have been caught in the gravitational net and reduced to a stain on the ground.

"Seems you can even cut through an atmospheric cage." Salinger jumped back.

But there was something hard at his back stopping him from retreating any farther: the wall of the prison spire. The sorcerer hadn't noticed it. He had been so overwhelmed by Iska's pursuit that he didn't even notice he had been cornered.

"Earth explosion," Salinger the Transcendental hollered. "Rise. Scorch the earth with your wrath."

"Imperial soldier! Get out of the way!" As an earth-type, Rin had sensed something coming from beneath Iska's feet.

Blistering energy was welling up from deep underground, heralding the most powerful of natural phenomena that was about to break through the earth's crust.

"You'll get swallowed by magma!"

There was an eruption—the ground below glimmered a brilliant red as chunks of molten earth and flares blasted outward.

This was unmistakably magma drawn from natural pools that lay deep within the planet.

There was no point in trying to cut it with his astral sword.

"—Gah...!" Iska leaped far back from the prison-spire wall.

Any point where the outer wall of the prison made contact with the approaching lava immediately liquefied. The nearby grass ignited from just the ambient heat as the molten rock continued pouring into the area around the spire.

"You saved me," Iska said.

"You were the lesser of two evils. That's all this is." Blood trailing from the corners of her mouth, Rin got up, panting for breath. "We're going to box him in, Imperial soldier. I hate to say it, but having you here is a miracle. I don't know how many aces he has up his sleeve, but this is where it ends."

"Hmm? Is that some kind of joke?" Salinger had alighted on the second-floor rooftop of the gnarled prison spire, enjoying the view as the wind ruffled his white hair. He narrowed his eyes and sneered at them. "You're making it seem as though I've shown you any of my tricks."

"...What's so odd about that?" The girl with brown hair returned his gaze. "In the end, you're nothing but a thief. You can't steal all of someone's astral powers—half is the best you can do. That means your power can't be greater than the attacks you've already shown us."

Ultimately, Salinger possessed only a fragment of the real thing.

Whether it be Nebulis's divine staffs, Alice's great Ice Calamity, or Kissing's Dragon of Thorns, a first-rate astral mage always had a trump card. But this man, a Water Mirror-type, didn't have anything like that to begin with.

"You're going to show us all the cards you have in your hand."

"My hand, huh? I see..." Salinger sighed. "That's my problem. I never intended to go easy on you, but I unconsciously held back. During the battle at the royal palace thirty years ago, I was too reluctant about showing it off, but because of that, I missed my chance."

"...What?"

"You think I have other cards *left* ? I never even showed any of my cards, even thirty years ago. Watch closely, maid, Imperial swordsman."

The Transcendental...

The origin of the name that the sorcerer had chosen for himself.

"It's deep. The core of astral power runs deeper than you know. Why don't I wipe you out by showing you just a peek into that abyss?"

An instant later, Iska and Rin saw a devastating blast of astral light come into being right before their eyes.

2

The Orelgan prison spire.

The grass of the eastern side of the grounds had been engulfed by red due to the Imperial military's firebombs and the free-flying embers that had been carried by the wind, ravishing other buildings.

"The suppression squads will continue to look for Salinger! The police will rescue the injured. And I will stop this fire!" Alice yelled inside the roaring flames.

As sweat beaded on her face, Alice raised her voice higher to be heard. "All prison guards are to help search for Salinger. We can't let him leave Alcatroz! Pay attention for any traces of him with—"

"It's no use." From behind Alice, a shadowy silhouette came out from the red flames and raised a fist, aiming for the Sovereign princess. **"He can't be stopped. Because there is no one who can stop him."**

"...Who do you think you're talking to?" A pillar of ice grew out of the ground, stopping the assassin's fist. *Crunch*. The ice creaked, shattering into thousands of fragments.

They were both unharmed.

Though it had been only a few minutes since this man had appeared, he had already conducted a nigh countless number of attacks and defenses.

"Your leadership is impressive. Just when I thought you were nothing more than the daughter of the sitting queen, it turns out you're quite the commanding officer. If you hadn't been here, this place would have already fallen."

"What an honor to receive your praise."

"My praise? I was just being sarcastic."

"Yes, I'm sure you were."

It was a strange electronic voice that seemed to worm its way into her eardrums, coiling itself around her heart. Alice gritted her teeth every time she heard it.

"Saint Disciple Nameless...this is my country. Leave this place, you lowly assassin."

“For a witch to call me lowly... How absurd.” The man was covered in a dark-gray photochemical suit from head to toe.

His physique was unknown. His voice was masked by electronics. It was rumored what lay under the suit was not a human but an autonomous mechanical soldier.

The Saint Disciple of the eighth seat, Nameless.

It hadn't even been two weeks since the scramble for the vortex. Alice would never have guessed that he would have infiltrated the Sovereign domain in the short time since then.

“I was surprised when you appeared. May I ask how you got past the borders?”

“By force, naturally.”

“Liar. There is no way I wouldn't have been informed if you had.”

The Imperial assassin was playing dumb. She didn't know how many of his subordinates were lurking nearby, but she was sure the Empire's military had concocted some scheme to infiltrate the country.

“Did you suggest this? Were you the one who came up with the plan to attack the prison and free Salinger?”

“Do you really need to know? What is in front of your eyes is the reality. The prison spire has been burned down, and Salinger the Transcendental will once again attack the royal palace. That's all you need to know.”

“I'll stop him.”

“When you're in this state?”

The air around them froze over, coalescing into dozens of ice arrows that shot at Nameless. But before they could reach him, the Imperial assassin disappeared into the flames.

...He hid again.

...Where will he come out of this time?!

The dust. The swaying flames. The leaping embers. This was certainly the most suitable environment for Nameless to hide in. Alice needed to know the direction of his approach to attack reliably—the only other option was to indiscriminately freeze everything in her vicinity.

But this situation would not allow her to do that.

“You thought you had an advantage battling in the Sovereignty?” The voice mingled with the roaring flames. **“Your subordinates, your kin, your people. Now, why don't you try**

showing them your powers?”

“Ugh! Shut your mouth!”

If she unleashed her powers now, her allies would be caught up in the area of effect.

And Nameless knew that Alice was aware of that more than anyone.

“Saint Disciple Nameless, where did your fervor go? Come at me with all you have!”

“With all I have? Sure. Once Salinger has left this place.”

“—Gh.”

He was so irritating.

But it was probably the perfect strategy.

...Rin, I'm counting on you.

...You're my last hope. As long as the Imperial military has its eyes on me, hunting down that sorcerer is up to you!

Alice was aware that Salinger's discovery and pursuit were dangerous endeavors. She didn't want to order her beloved attendant to fulfill that role.

...There's only one other person.

...If only he was here... No, Alice, don't go there. You can't wish for that.

She couldn't hope for something that convenient—though she had wanted the Imperial swordsman to help her deal with the sorcerer in exchange for a promise to let him safely leave the country.

But she hadn't been able to say it.

It would be too easy. It would be too impure. Her feelings toward her rival—toward Iska—would have been tainted. She could never allow that to happen.

“Nameless!” She gritted her teeth as she glared at the raging flames. “Hurry up and come out. If you don't, and if I have to ignore you—”

A pillar of fire leaped into the air.

And it wasn't part of the inferno that had been charring Alice's surroundings.

Right in front of the prison spire, flames mixed with lava blotted out the night sky with hot red, as though a volcano had erupted.

The violent upheaval lit up a shadowy figure—a man standing on the second-floor roof of the prison spire...a man with white hair whose coat billowed in the air.

“...Salinger?!”

That was when Alice saw the figure of the black-haired swordsman challenging him.

3

Water Mirror allowed its user to steal another's power, making it the most dangerous and abhorred of astral energies.

Salinger could transfer 50 percent of another person's astral power into himself by holding their crests together.

“A misunderstanding. You're delusional. You think that's stealing? Ha! Only someone with no knowledge of astral power would say that.” On the second floor of the Orelgan prison spire with the outer wall to the ground floor under him, the captivating man with white hair made a bold declaration. “This power allows me to *divide astral power in half*.”

“...Nonsense!” Rin screamed at him from the ground. “You're spinning the truth. You're reducing the power of the mages by half. What makes you any different from a common thief?”

“*There are things I can do specifically with half power.* That's what I'm saying.” Two different lights flickered from the sorcerer's hands: red from his right hand and blue from his left. “‘*Sublimate.*’ ‘*Ruin and rise.*’”

“...Ugh. Impossible!” Rin was at a loss for words. The two colors indicated that he was controlling two powers at the same time.

Other than the Founder Nebulis, no one could use two powers at once.

“Fire and water. Earth and wind. Yin and yang—” As though he was casting a spell, his words melded with the stirring wind. “Two opposites rise to a higher dimension to unify: a refinement that no lone astral power can attain. See for yourself.”

Using two powers at half their strength at the same time, he could unify the incomplete components into one.

That was the essence of Water Mirror.

“And this is the planet's will.”

It was the *sanctus* of fire and water, a Gradual among stars: “*A fire marked the start of humankind. Rise beyond the banks of the frozen river.*”

Salinger called forward an ice floe accompanied by burning hellfire.

Iska had seen both of those astral attacks before, except...the “flames” that were falling from the sky had iced over, turning them bright blue.

It was frozen fire—a searing cold heat.

Iska’s mind ground to a halt as he tried to process this incomprehensible situation that seemed to defy the laws of physics. Could this phenomenon that surpassed human comprehension be cut by a sword?

...I don’t know what kind of power this is, but if it reaches the ground, it’ll be a disaster. That I know for sure.

“Get away, Rin!” He kicked off the prison spire, twirling into the air. With a triple jump, Iska built up enough momentum to go past the second floor, slashing toward the *sanctus* of fire and water.

Iska brought down his sword on the frozen fire. “Hah!”

The outer ice wall that surrounded the flames broke apart—revealing the glittering source of the fire that abruptly flared, radiating like a beam of pure sunlight.

“Ugh! So this ice is like a coffin that seals away the flame...!”

“Looks like you’ve destroyed its balance.” While manipulating two powers at once, Salinger pronounced his victory. “That was your mistake. Be gone.”

Iska had quite literally smashed the equilibrium between the two powers, disrupting its harmony. The power of the remaining fire expanded uncontrollably, inevitably surging outward in an explosion.

“Iskaaaaaaaa?!” Rin screamed. She watched everything as the swordsman disappeared into the blast, unable to do anything.

As if it was the grandest fireworks display of all time, the red ball of fire burst, setting loose a thousand—no, *tens of thousands* of flaring embers that spread across the night sky.

“.....Salinger... Are you saying this is the reason why you collected all those astral powers?!”

“This wasn’t my reason. *This was just a happy little accident.* ”

“Huh?”

“This is what I’ve achieved so far, but it isn’t the destination.” Only the man’s voice could be heard inside the curtain of pouring embers. “This is the true nature of Water Mirror. I can combine two great powers and bring them to an even higher plane. But this is

still only the second stage.”

“...Are you saying you haven’t stolen enough yet? How many powers are you going to poach and plunder?!”

“You just don’t understand, do you?” The sorcerer’s expression showed his utter contempt for Rin. “Combining and mixing astral powers is work fit for a mage. I aim for a level of existence that goes beyond that. In other words, it is...”

The third stage. The unification of humans and astral power.

“...What...are you saying?” It took all Rin had to get that out. Her throat was parched from the fire, to the point that even speaking was agonizingly painful. “Unifying humans and astral power...?”

“Like the Founder Nebulis.”

“...You’re saying that happened to the Revered Founder?!”

“On this planet, there have been only two people who have been able to attain that state by their own power. Both are true monsters. However, I will inevitably have the same one day. I shall follow in their footsteps.”

Rin understood.

She understood why he called himself *the Transcendental* .

It wasn’t pride or hubris. He wanted to completely surpass astral mages. And he certainly had the power and mindset to make such a grandiose declaration.

“...Then I really can’t let you leave this place, Salinger.” Rin drew out daggers from behind her.

This man was dangerous. He had threatened the royal palace once before already. There was no doubt he would try to bring down the Sovereignty, which was a danger she couldn’t overlook as a citizen who sought peace.

“You haven’t lost your will to fight yet? You just watched that swordsman meet his end.”

“His end? You think that was an end?” With her brown hair whipping around, the witch snorted. “Ha! Finally. This time, it’s my turn to laugh at you.”

“...?”

“You don’t know a thing about Iska.” With the back of her hand, she wiped away the blood still seeping from her mouth, pointing

the tips of her daggers at the sorcerer, whose face contorted dubiously. “That Imperial swordsman is the one and only rival that my lady Aliceliese has ever acknowledged. And more importantly, he’s the man who drove away the very Revered Founder who you dared to call a monster.”

“What?” Salinger knit his eyebrows.

To one who knew nothing of the mortal struggle that had taken place in the neutral city of Ain, Rin must have sounded as though she was recalling a fever dream.

“He drove away the Founder? Out of all the things you could claim. Is that a joke?”

“There’s no way Iska would be finished after your measly attack. I’m just glad I could buy some time by going along with your idiotic speech.”

“...Enough. I’m sick of your face. Be gone.” He invoked the *sanctus* of flame and water—the culmination of Salinger’s quest for power...

“Where do you think you’re looking, sorcerer?”

From the blazing column that engulfed the prison spire burst out a single swordsman in a shower of sparkling embers.

“Impossible?!” Salinger yelped in a strained voice.

He had been certain that his trump card eliminated that boy—what else could have happened when the swordsman pierced through the ice and unleashed an explosive torrent of searing fire. It had enough power to hurt even the dragons that lived in the unexplored frontiers of the planet, which was why the sorcerer felt a chill along his spine for the first time in his life.

“What... What did you do, swordsman?!” Salinger bounded from the second floor to the fourth, using the power of astral wind to soar into the sky above. In pursuit, Iska leaped from the roof on the second floor to the third. “That was one of my strongest creations! Not something a mortal could withstand!”

“...These two astral swords form one.”

As the sorcerer leaped to the highest floor of the spire, Iska jumped past the third.

“The black steel astral sword can cut through any astral attack, and the white can invoke the power of the last thing cut.”

“Huh...?! You couldn’t have.”

“I cut the outer wall—the ice that was sealing away the fire. Then I called that ice back.” The injuries on Iska’s body were not from burns but from frostbite, which could mean only one thing...

“You’re saying you wore the ice that you called back on your own body?!”

With some quick thinking, Iska had fashioned himself a kind of ice armor to protect himself from the fire blast. However, what really made Salinger’s eyes open wide in disbelief was the reckless idea that Iska had to don the astral ice.

“Ridiculous. That would have frozen your entire body! Even if you had protected yourself from the fire, you should have ended up an ice sculpture and suffocated!”

“That’s right. *That’s why it took a while to melt it.* ”

“.....Huh?”

This time Salinger was undoubtedly at a loss for words. What had Iska done? After he had frozen his body to protect himself from the fire blast, how had he revived himself? That was when Salinger the Transcendental realized something: It had to be the blaze engulfing the prison spire, burning far enough to reach the roof on the second floor. Those fires had been started with incendiary devices that the Imperial army had deployed. They wouldn’t go out simply because some time had passed.

“So you jumped into the fire?!”

To protect himself from the astral fire, he had frozen himself by wearing the astral ice. To melt that ice, he had thrown himself into the wildfire that the Empire had created.

If he hadn’t revived himself fast enough, he would have frozen to death. But even if he had managed to thaw himself out, if he had been even a few moments late in his escape from the fire, he would have burned to death.

“You’re insane. You’re saying you thought up that nonsense in the moment—without hesitation?!”

“I had no reason to hesitate.”

“—NGH?! ” The sorcerer staggered at the swordsman’s overwhelming presence. Salinger had never witnessed an enemy as strange as this one. He shuddered with unprecedented fear. Not even during the battle at the royal palace thirty years ago had he felt this way—not even when he faced Queen Nebulis VII. And yet, he found this swordsman deeply unsettling.

“You’re saying that...you broke through my secret technique with that idiocy?!”

“Where there’s a will.”

These had been the terms of his exchange with the Nebulis princess: He had accepted the key hidden in the handkerchief, which bound him in a promise with his rival, Alice.

...How could I...turn my back on our promise?

Iska couldn’t allow himself to reach his limit before he settled things with the Ice Calamity Witch, after all.

“A will? What an asinine thing to say!” Salinger howled, a ball of rage and fear. “You repulsive berserker! Don’t you dare think you can use that trick a second time!”

The sorcerer was determined to not allow him to pull off the same tactic twice and live to tell about it. Salinger fought back the roaring flames in his heart, keeping his mind ice-cold.

Salinger’s strength didn’t reside in his astral power. His bold yet cautious nature were the dual parts of his character that defined his true worth.

“This is a secret technique derived from the Founder’s bloodline. Be proud that you have laid eyes on it!”

This time, it was the *sanctus* of wind and lightning. Astral light shot from Salinger’s raised right hand only to be drawn in by a swirling cloud that raged in the dead of night.

“Air and lightning. Dance! Go wild!”

The atmosphere warped as a sandstorm swallowed the prison spire and started to blow away everything in the area. The outer wall of the spire peeled off and crashed to the ground, extinguishing the flames in the immediate vicinity. It enveloped Iska and Rin before they could bat an eye.

“A sandstorm!” They weren’t threatened by the wind itself: The raging storm had started to kick up and fling pebbles into the air, small stones about the size of the tip of a person’s pinkie finger. Once lifted by wind of this speed, those tiny fragments hit with the strength of a bullet, transforming the storm into a wind-powered machine gun.

However, they didn’t hit Iska.

“...Earth, gather!” The ground reared up, clustering into a humanoid golem that acted as a protective shield for Iska against the pelts of pebbles.

“Rin?”

“...Don’t worry about me. Just destroy him!” Rin had only a small earthen shield in her own hand. She had reached the limits of her astral power. The witch hadn’t been able to recover from the earlier attack, choosing to form a single golem for Iska. “The golem won’t last long... *Go!* ”

“Maid! The curtain has long since fallen on your act. You’re an eyesore!”

Claps of thunder boomed in the eye of the storm, parting swirling clouds as lightning came crashing down, aiming straight for the ground—where the girl with brown hair had fallen to her knees, far past her physical limit.

The lightning arced toward Rin. In that moment...

...the lightning froze in place.

The air became still.

The storm halted.

A subarctic chill iced over the injuries across Rin’s body—a frost that could even stop lightning itself.

“What are you doing to my Rin?”

Ice was everywhere. With just one attack, the astral mage cut straight to the heart of the matter. Cloaked in the chilled air, the girl calmly walked toward Rin, strolling with refined elegance.

“...Lady Alice!”

“Thank you for your hard work, Rin. Good job holding out against him.” Alice didn’t even give the sorcerer above her as much as a passing glance as she held Rin in her arms.

She presented her opponent with plenty of opportunities to attack her. The princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty was so certain that the match had been settled that she saw no reason to be on guard.

“Iska...” Clutching onto Rin, the girl with golden hair quietly crooned his name. “So you really did answer my call.”

With his eyes pinned on the sorcerer at the spire’s top, Iska kicked off the fourth floor into the heart of the raging sandstorm.

Higher... Higher. Higher. High as the tallest buildings of the thirteenth state.

“I win, sorcerer.”

“Don’t growl at me, mongrel! You’re only a common swordsman

—thinking you could stand at my level is a dream beyond a dream. You're nothing to me!"

Beams of light leaped from the sorcerer's hands, condensing in his palms to take on the shape of a pair of swords.

This was the *sanctus* of light and dark, Gradual among stars. "*My majesty, may your unending light subdue this abyss.*"

Light and shadow.

One sword radiated a multicolored luminance, while the other sword was ink black, absorbing all light. It was impossible to imagine the power they possessed. Speculation was meaningless.

But...

"You lose, Salinger!"

...in the end, it didn't matter whether their powers were to be feared or not. The wielder was a sorcerer.

Though he had mastered using astral powers, he wasn't a swordsman.

And because of that...

...Iska's astral swords plowed through the sorcerer's.



The sorcerer collapsed after he was hit.

At the top of the Orelgan prison spire, the criminal who tried to surpass royalty had been struck on his arm.

“...Ha. Ha. Ha-ha-ha-ha!” he roared in delight.

“Salinger?”

“Isn’t it amusing? Just as I reach my peak as an astral mage, the planet casts a troublesome foe in my direction. A test! My trial!” Salinger plummeted from the fifth floor of the spire. Though he fell backward toward the earth, his expression was one of exaltation. “Heed me. Nothing can keep me contained!”

His pronouncement echoed as if a curse.

The transcendental sorcerer fell headfirst down the prison spire to the grounds below.

4

Day had broken on Alcatroz.

As the night pulled back its dark screen hanging over the city, it became clear that the prison spire had been reduced to a burned-out husk: The soil was charred, the ground scorched by the firebombs and astral fire, black soot still rising from the area.

“Lady Alice, we have finished checking on the prisoners. No one has seen any escapees.”

“I see. That’s good.” Alice slowly rounded the grounds. She glanced at the outer wall of the spire that had been slightly liquefied and turned to the attendant next to her. “Rin, what about your injuries?”

“They do not bother me.”

“Really? Then is this scrape here fine, too?”

“Yow! Lady Alice, why would you do that?!”

“Because you’re acting tough.” Alice was half-worried and half-joking. She burst into laughter. “It’s just you and me. Be honest.”

“It doesn’t hurt.”

“.....”

“Just kidding! Kidding! It really does hurt! Please don’t smile while jabbing my injuries!” The girl wrapped in bandages scuttled

away in a fluster. “M-more importantly, Lady Alice, about that sorcerer...”

“I’ll think of a place to hold him. We need to keep him somewhere better built.”

“No, what I would like to tell you is...” *Ahem*, Rin coughed. “A message just came from the Sovereignty. The queen has praised you for stopping Salinger’s escape at a critical moment.”

“Right. I think my mother must feel relieved.”

The transcendental sorcerer.

Alice hadn’t fought him directly. Now that she’d heard Rin’s stories and seen her wounds, it wasn’t weird to hear that the queen was relieved.

...But the one who brought him down wasn’t Rin or me.

...If I told my mother that it was an Imperial swordsman, I wonder what kind of expression she’d make.

He was no longer there.

Just around that time, he must have been approaching the border.

“I fulfilled my promise. We’re good now, right?”

It had been just before daybreak. He had said that at this exact spot before they had parted.

The promise was that he would help capture Salinger in exchange for removing his handcuffs. However, Alice hadn’t said anything about that. She had hesitated to say anything and, in the end, never mentioned it at all.

But he had realized it.

...Iska could have immediately run away after taking off the handcuffs.

...But he came here.

He had fought in her place and even saved Rin’s life. Just thinking back on it, she could feel her expression start to soften. She felt like skipping with joy right where she stood.

Ahhh. This is bad.

Alice didn’t even understand what was wrong, but she felt that way nevertheless.

“...No, but that’s not it, either!”

“Lady Alice?”

“I was almost going to thank him, but that’s not right. Because everything that happened was all according to our agreement! It was proper for Iska to go. That’s how I should see it!”

Her intuition hadn’t been wrong.

He was her archrival.

That was why she wouldn’t tell anyone in the Sovereignty about him.

The Imperial swordsman is mine and mine alone.

...Yes, that’s right.

...This is how it is when it comes to Iska. I won’t thank him.

Iska was a long-standing foe who Princess Aliceliese would fully dedicate her being and will toward fighting.

It was only natural for things to turn out this way.

“This is a good thing, Rin. There is no reason at all for us to be grateful toward him.”

“R-right!”

“What we should be doing is returning to the Sovereignty. Let’s go home. There’s a whole slew of things we need to report to my mother, after all.”

The report would keep him a secret, of course.

With this promise in mind, Alice started walking with her attendant in tow.

INTERMISSION



The Transcendentals

1

The capital city of Yunmelngen.

An air transporter landed on a base located at the center of Sector Three. In peacetime, members of the air force would have greeted the vehicle with a salute. But given the current state of affairs, it was normal for no one to approach the plane. They had grown accustomed to them.

“...”

The door opened to let out just a single person to the gangway. It was Nameless, wearing a photochemical suit from head to toe.

After hopping onto the plane hidden along the Sovereign border, the Saint Disciple had finally returned to the capital, silently trudging down the ramp.

“That was more of a hassle than I thought it would be.”

Right next to Nameless came a man’s voice from seemingly out of nowhere.

The air slowly shimmered until a distinctly human form became visible. It was as though the newcomer were crawling out of a gap in the atmosphere—to reveal *the Saint Disciple Nameless* .

“And it’s odd. I heard that you would be disguising yourself when you invaded the Sovereignty, but...”

“.....”

“Are you trying to provoke me, *Risya* ?”

The two Namelesses faced each other. Though both were covered from head to toe in dark-gray photochemical suits, there was an obvious difference in their heights.

The one who had come down from the ramp of the transporter was petite and slender.

“Pweh...!” The shorter one vented the pressure on the helmet

and began taking it off. The Nameless who pulled off the suit from the neck down was a bespectacled woman. “Wow, it was so hottt in there. I thought I’d die from overheating. I’ll never wear a mystery-made metal fiber suit again.”

Large droplets of sweat beaded on her forehead as the Saint Disciple took a deep breath.

“This didn’t work at all. An experimental adaptive camouflage suit with a strong exoskeleton is something I can use, but I hit my limit fighting in it after a few minutes. I was so exhausted that I just ran away.”

“And your opponent?”

“The Ice Calamity Witch.”

In the middle of the night before last, the one who had fought the Ice Calamity Witch at the prison tower had been Risya in this disguise.

She had done it to help Salinger the Transcendental escape from the prison spire.

There had been one other reason for her fight, but for the purposes of gathering experimental data on the adaptive weapon, a purebred was the worst kind of foe to encounter.

“It was impossible. It augmented my physical strength, but a human body just can’t keep up with the pressure and heat in the suit. I thought I’d fall right over while facing her.”

“Your effort was wasted. I told you it would be.”

They had been trying to *mass-produce pseudo-superhumans* .

Instead of training elite soldiers like the Saint Disciple Nameless and Iska, it would be more efficient for a normal soldier to don a suit that would give them superhuman strength.

It was a suit that Risya had risked her own body to test.

“We’ll need another decade to improve.”

“We’ll see about that.” Nameless snorted flatly when Risya casually lamented. **“Risya In Empire, you would never need *that* toy in the first place .”**

“Hmm? What are you trying to say?” The military adviser of the Lord studied the assassin through her thin lenses.

The fifth seat and the eighth. Both tried to glean information by closely scrutinizing the other’s expression. That was the nature of their exchange. It felt as if an unyielding hush separated them.

“Well, I like using these cheap tricks from time to time.” The first to break the silence was Risya. “And what about you? You

came all the way here for a report.”

“You successfully infiltrated the Sovereignty.”

“I know what happens next.”

“There were two special-mission units, and the infiltration into the central state was a success. The guards at the royal palace are not ordinary. It will take some time before we can conduct a raid.”

“Oh, so what?” Risya smiled seductively with her entrancing lips. “I wonder if this’ll put the Eight Great Apostles in a good mood for about three days.”

“And the report to the Lord. Are you giving it?”

“Hmm, right.” She pushed up the bridge of her glasses.

The Saint Disciple Risya played up her childish tone more than usual. “How about we save it for next time? The Lord is still enjoying a trip outside, after all. It’d be terrible to put a damper on that.”

2

Within the Nebulis Sovereignty lay the suburbs of the thirteenth state of Alcatroz.

Far from the center of the city, which was cluttered with gray buildings, was a nature park. Avian chirps echoed in the woods before the sun had a chance to rise in the early morning.

It was a nostalgic place.

Thirty years had passed since the last visit. This place had been a calm field of green long before Salinger had attempted to attack the royal palace of Nebulis all those years ago.

“It’s been a while since it’s been so quiet.”

The bottom-floor room of the Orelgan prison spire had always smelled of stagnant mildew. There was no way to erase the smell that clung to every sense, even by dousing everything in the most expensive perfume.

As for this place...it smelled of the dewy meadows. Of the fragrant soil. Of the flowers. Just breathing in purified one’s lungs.

But at present, Salinger was not in a state where he could stay in the woods for very long.

“I suppose I have about one more day. Until the *other me* at the prison spire disappears.”

The guards would likely notice it, too—that the man they had thrown into the underground jail was a fake. It was a second self he had created using his astral power.

“Heed me. Nothing can keep me contained!”

Right before he had fallen from the prison spire, Salinger had let his double plummet to the ground, and he had escaped. He had deceived everyone who was watching.

“But...”

In the early-morning sun that filtered through the branches, Salinger the Transcendental turned his handsome face to the depths of the forest. A smile that he couldn’t hold back played on his face, and his shoulders quivered.

“This is great. This is really great, isn’t it?”

It seemed during the thirty years that he had been imprisoned, the world had become more interesting.

“That Alice girl. I can’t believe she’s Mirabella’s second daughter... Ha! That girl Mirabella. You didn’t have it in you to be an astral mage, but it seems you have the bare minimum to know how to be a queen. Looks like the apple did fall far from the tree!”

Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX.

He had seen all kinds of astral abilities, but he had never seen anything cold enough to freeze lightning. It was probably a first in Sovereign history.

And speaking of firsts, there was that swordsman.

The Imperial soldier Iska.

Salinger had no idea why that boy had been in the Sovereignty and at the prison spire. But he didn’t care about that.

“I’ve got to thank you—will of the planet...!” He couldn’t hold back his mirth, slowly building into a roar. “The more entertainment, the better.”

He wouldn’t rush things.

All he had to do was wait. When the capricious whims of the planet’s fate guided him to the right place at the right time, he would see his amusing entertainers again.

And when that happened, Salinger had three more *sanctuses* left to use as trump cards. If he showed them everything, the battle at the prison spire might have gone in a different direction.

However, Salinger had been reluctant.

He couldn't show his full hand yet. That was because it would reveal his hand to the Nebulis family that he would be battling before long.

The one he needed to fear wasn't the current queen—for there were others to contend with, true monsters who had received the unbroken power of the Founder.

"I had been tired of this world, but I wonder why. This seems like it could be fun."

He flipped his coat as he walked deeper into the woods, marching forward with strong, sure steps. The edge of the nature park was connected to the twelfth state. If he could leave the thirteenth state, his pursuers would give up for the time being.

"Hmm. Oh?"

It was eerily quiet.

Salinger smiled slightly when the birdsong stopped at once.

He noticed a certain wind that blew through the forest, causing it to stir. Though it was a current of air, he surmised in an instant that it held a trace amount of astral power.

This wasn't the work of astral wind.

It was strong astral energy that embodied itself as a wave. It was an extravagant crystallization of power.

"Who is it?" he asked the presence at his back without turning around.

It wasn't a pursuer from the suppression squads. There was no way someone who possessed such palpable energy would be in such a lowly position.

"You won't answer? All right. In that case, I'll force—" The transcendental sorcerer held his breath.

As he faced the wave rippling out from the shadows of the trees in front of him, the man with white hair was unable to stop shaking...from delight.

There was no one there. No one had said anything.

But the power of the undulations was more than enough for him to realize something was hiding itself there.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! It's you! I couldn't have expected you'd come to welcome me here!" He opened both his hands.

Then the transcendental sorcerer leaped up, propelling himself forward with fervent force.

“Lord Yunmelngen! The cost of showing yourself to me isn’t going to come cheap!”

EPILOGUE



A Wish Upon the Planet

1

The natural border, the Saint Elzaria River.

The Sovereign border and checkpoint were at the center of the iron bridge that was adrift in the morning mist. A single car drove along it.

“...Whew!” From her seat in the back next to Iska, Captain Mismis turned toward the checkpoint behind them. “Boy, I’m so relieved. They really gave us trouble during the entry inspection, but departure was a breeze. Now we’ve finished the minimum requirements for clearing our special mission!”

They had whizzed through the checkpoint and crossed the bridge.

All they had to do now was drive down the highway to the closest neutral city and head back to the Empire from there.

“I’m so glad you were safe, Iska. Jhin was saying they might’ve tortured you or overdosed you on drugs...but you weren’t, right?”

“All thanks to you guys.”

As Captain Mismis let out a breath of relief, Iska nodded in reply to both her questions. Well, he *had* been attacked by Rin once, but this wasn’t the time or the place to mention that.

“I was so surprised. I can’t believe you would all show up in the Sovereignty. I mean, this is late, but I’m impressed you got past the border...”

“Damn straight. I’m still anxious as all hell.” That came from Jhin in the driver’s seat.

Riding shotgun, Nene looked unusually tired.

“It was a blessing in disguise. We wouldn’t have been able to reach you any other way,” continued Jhin.

“You mean the special mission?”

“Yeah. According to Risya, our crests will disappear in a few more days. We’re lucky we got there in time,” Jhin said.

Unit 907 had taken part in a special mission to expose the Imperial soldiers to astral power as a human experiment to see whether convincing astral crests could be formed on their skin. Infiltrating the Sovereignty with these artificial crests had been their role.

...That mission saved my life.

...Even though the timing meant it came right down to the very last second, just like Jhin said.

Iska leaned back in his seat. He would get to go home. When he realized they were heading back, Iska was overcome by an extreme drowsiness.

“Iska, you tired? You’ve gotta be exhausted, huh?” asked Nene.

“...Yeah, but I’m fine. I think I can stay up until we reach the Empire.”

Though he said that, it had been a while since he had felt this tired. When he thought about it, at first he thought it might have been due to his battle with Salinger. But when it came to grave battles, there had been others that had been far more physically strenuous.

What else could it be?

A certain event floated to the back of his mind.

“Hee-hee, Iska! Knock it off! That tickles. Where do you think you’re touching?”

“Hey, you can’t run away! Gotcha.”

It was the night Iska had spent as a prisoner.

From the living room, Iska had heard Alice mumbling in her sleep in her bedroom. Her sighs were slightly amorous. Plus, she kept repeating, “Hee-hee, you’re not...as I expected,” through the night. How was he supposed to not be bothered by those mysteriously suggestive phrases?

What could she have meant?

What was so...*unexpected* about him? And why was she enjoying it so much? He was so consumed by curiosity that he hadn’t been able to relax at all.

“Does that mean it’s Alice’s fault that I’m so tired, then?!”

“Iska?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing! Really...” He sighed as he stared at the roof of the car. He knew he should just forget about it. He wasn’t in the Sovereignty anymore. He was no longer a prisoner. He had to act like a proper Imperial solider. “I’m just glad you’re in a better mood, Captain.”

“Me? I’m fine now. Besides, I didn’t get shot up too badly.”

“Um. If you’re really in that good of a mood, does that mean all the astral-crest stuff is settled?”

The captain had become a witch.

The crest on Mismis’s left shoulder was not artificial like Jhin’s or Nene’s but the genuine article.

They had yet to figure out a lasting way to hide her mark.

“Did you figure out something that’d work well while I was out?”

“...”

“Captain?”

“Aaaaaah?! Stop it! Don’t talk about it! I’m still not ready to talk about it!”

“Did you really forget about the crest?!”

“Iska, you need to help me think up a solution once we get back to the capital! Now it’s your turn to help me!”

“...Y-yes, ma’am!” He comforted the captain, whose eyes brimmed with tears, patting her on the head and nodding once.

...Right.

...There’s something more difficult that she needs to work through.

It was something more challenging than crossing the Sovereign border: Mismis needed to continue living in the Empire as a witch.

“Of course. This time, I’ll save you, Captain.” He nodded again to the captain who suddenly looked very fragile.

Iska clenched his hand into a fist.

2

The central state of the Nebulis Sovereignty. The Star Spire in the royal palace.

This was the home of the closest garden in the world to the sky. In the floating garden, Alice perched on a bench among the fragrant flowers and stared at the setting sun.

"Lady Alice." Rin had appeared in the garden, delivering a deep bow. "I have given her majesty the queen a report without delay."

"Thank you, Rin. I'll talk to my mother tonight. I imagine she'll want to talk about Salinger again anyway."

"Please make sure to take a bath before you do."

"I know that... Geez." Her prided golden hair, currently sticky with sweat and dust, was tinged by the crimson light.

After taking command at the prison spire and battling Nameless, she had returned home without a moment's rest. She had finished giving her report to the queen and her aides before coming here.

"Luck wasn't on my side this time. My hair is dirty, my clothes are in tatters, and in the end, I let that Saint Disciple get away..."

The Saint Disciple Nameless, who had disappeared in the middle of the fight with Alice.

She didn't know how he had disappeared, but around the same time, the Imperial soldiers had all vanished from the prison spire as well, pulling back from the suppression squads mid-fight.

"I'm still unsure of how the Imperial units crossed the border."

"Yes, the queen was concerned about that. We also discovered suspicious persons outside Alcatroz. There may still be Imperial espionage units operating in the Sovereignty."

"We should be cautious as well, but..." Alice put her hands on her knees and took a deep breath, shaking her head and shooing away her worries as she adopted her usual smile. "It wasn't all bad. Rin, as your master, I'm proud of how you handled yourself. You fought bravely against that sorcerer."

"...Y-yes, ma'am! I'm grateful for your words!" Rin formally stood at attention. "It is an honor to receive such praise as your attendant!"

"Yes, and also—" She couldn't say it out loud, but...

...*Oh no.*

...*This is bad.*

If she wasn't paying attention, she would end up thinking about *him* immediately.

"Yes, about me. If you don't think I'm a weird witch, then tell me your impression of me."

"A rival on the battlefield."

She couldn't help but be happy whenever she recalled that exchange.

She wasn't a witch or a princess.

Only he sees me for who I really am. Whenever she remembered the way her heart had pounded upon this realization, she would melt into a puddle.

".....Iska."

"Lady Alice, I swear I heard a troubling name just now."

"I-it's fine!" Alice stood with extra force as Rin shot her a dubious look. "Iska and I are official—official rivals! What's the problem with saying his name?!"

"It only poses problems!" Rin's shoulders slumped. "But that Imperial swordsman saved my life. Though he's a foe, I respect him as a soldier, even though I hate to admit it."

"Right?"

"But you can't keep saying that swordsman's name. Especially in the Sovereignty."

"...But."

"I'll tell the queen."

".....Fiiiiiiine. You're such a worrywart, Rin."

Even if she said the name of the Imperial swordsman, no one should have known the name of a mere foot soldier. This was the Nebulis Sovereignty, after all.

"Well, fine. Rin, please prepare the bath. We will take one together."

"...What?"

"Oh? Why are you so unwilling?"

"It's your fault, Lady Alice! You look at me all pitiful whenever you see me naked. I swear I can hear you thinking, ...*It's all right, Rin. Everyone grows at their own pace. Don't lose hope!*"

"Hee-hee, you're so cute when you get like that."

"Lady Alice?!"

Their shrieks and cackles echoed through the floating garden.



Within the palace's Star Spire, away from the garden, was the youngest princess's room. In terms of luxury, it didn't fall behind the second-born princess's room, though it didn't have a single light

lit in the living area. The entire space was shrouded in silence.

“Iska and I are official—official rivals!”

“But you can’t keep saying that swordsman’s name. Especially in the Sovereignty.”

The conversation between the second princess, Alice, and the attendant rang through the room.

It hadn’t been wiretapped.

The words were being replayed with astral power. After the dainty girl intently listened to their conversation over and over, she let a word slip through her lips. “Iska?”

She was the third princess, Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX.

Though Sisbell shared facial features with Alice, her face was considerably younger. Donning a frilly dress that complemented her looks, she resembled an adorable doll. She sank down on the floor, allowing herself to vocalize: “An Imperial soldier...?”

Sisbell herself was a high-octane purebred.

Her astral power of illumination could let her replay the sounds and shapes of past events, allowing her to snoop on anything that happened within the royal palace.

Lies would not work against Sisbell.

She was the most feared of the royal family by the palace staff.

“An Imperial soldier of interest to my dear sister Alice...? A rival?” She ran her fingers over her lips as she mulled over the information.

How many times had it been now? Sisbell felt she had heard Alice say it in the past—as if in a whisper. Though Alice had said his name under her breath, away from prying ears, Sisbell could even reproduce those utterances with her astral power.

“Iska...Iska.....?” she repeated. “.....” In silence, she placed her hands to her chest, feeling her heartbeat putter with unusual speed under the fabric of her dress.

“It couldn’t be,” she rasped from parched lips. “It couldn’t be. Nothing could be as coincidental...”

The Imperial soldier named Iska.

It was the name of the soldier who had released her from *her cell* almost a year ago.

“ Shhh, keep quiet... I'm gonna let you out right now.”

“...Why are you...letting me escape...?”

“Iska, the Youngest Saint Disciple in History.”

“Imprisoned for treason against the nation and aiding the escape of a witch. Given a life sentence.”

He hadn't told her his name.

But after Sisbell had returned to the Sovereignty, she had learned about Iska's identity through the periodicals that had been published by the neutral cities.

A year ago, Sisbell had been determined to infiltrate the Empire and failed. That was when he had saved her.

They shared the same name.

If the Imperial soldier who her sister called a rival was also a Saint Disciple, it would all make sense.

“But...it's inconceivable...,” the purebred repeated in a strained voice.

Unbelievable.

“That sort of coincidence is impossible. It'd be too easy...of an explanation...” She squeezed the hem of her clothes, shoulders shuddering as she gritted her teeth. “Fate of the planet. I will not be swayed by your temptation... But if I could meet that soldier again —”

She wished upon the planet.

If prayer had power, she would offer as many as necessary, even if she knew it was a miracle that would never be fulfilled.

“Please...save me again...!”

Afterword

And so he confronts the secret on her back.

The unfamiliar pattern etched across her skin. A mark that curiously glows as if she really is possessed by something.

In this series, this bruise that holds astral power makes her a “witch.”

When the princess asks the captive what he thinks about her astral crest, what will he say in response? And how will this conversation change the paths they walk? These questions propelled the plot in this volume.

All right, well, thank you very much for picking up the third volume of *Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World* ! In this book, I wanted to place focus on astral crests. The theme was that they “just can’t get away.” Is it fate or a trick of the stars?

Whereas the swordsman and the witch had a series of missed connections in the previous volume, that’s completely reversed in this book, when they’re presented with an unexpected opportunity to live as prisoner and guard in close quarters. It takes a great deal of courage to confront the inner thoughts and beliefs of another person, but this leap of faith is necessary to reach a mutual understanding—even though it causes them to butt heads at times.

In this volume, they’ve clearly recognized the other party as a rival, heightening tensions. The story is going to get wild, so buckle up!

By the way, there was another keyword in this story: *escape* . The main antagonist of this volume makes a break for it; the *girl* who makes an appearance at the end of the book managed to break out... Well, that’s what you’ll have to look forward to in the next book. (And yes, that’s the girl who appeared in the outset of Volume 1.)

Now I'd like to talk about new developments.

Our Last Crusade started off as a new series this May, and the second volume did well, following the first one. With a bunch of people cheering me on, I've been able to continue it as a new series this year.

Thank you very much. I'd like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude.

To my illustrator, Ao Nekonabe, and my main editor, K, I received an incredible amount of support from both of you. I may be jumping the gun here, but I'd be so happy if we could work together again this coming year.

The next volume of this series is slated for spring of next year. Though it will be a wait, I think the next book will be a good one, and I'm already excited for you to read it. And while you wait, I have another new series that I would like to introduce here.

Published by MF Bunko J with an anticipated release date of October 25:

Why Doesn't Anyone Remember My World? Volume 2.

An epic about a boy who is forgotten by the rest of the world, fighting against angels, demons, mythical beasts, and other powerful species as he tries to restore "true" history in a world where it's been rewritten.

I think it'll be accessible, since the second volume just came out. And it's doing well, too. It was met with good reception, and I am looking forward to working on it along with *Our Last Crusade*.

The plan is to publish the third volume in February. Be on the lookout!

Well, I'm starting to run out of space.

This is a story about the swordsman Iska and the witch princess Alice.

To the duo that often clashes but always finds themselves unable to get away from each other, what does the fate of the planet have in store for them?

I hope you're anticipating the fourth volume, which will feature all kinds of new faces, including the young girl who appeared in the epilogue.

All right, I'll see you around—either next February in the third volume of *Why Doesn't Anyone Remember My World?* (MF Bunko J) or next spring in the fourth volume of *Our Last Crusade* , although it is my deepest wish that we meet again in both.

From me to you in the advent of fall,

Kei Sazane

https://twitter.com/sazane_k (This is where I'll post about new publications.)

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